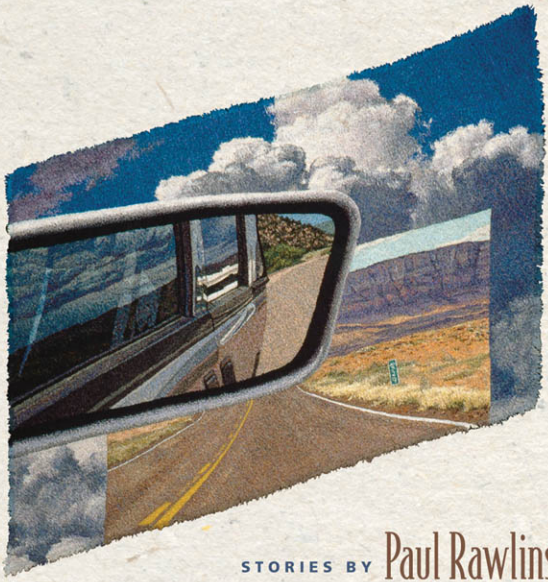
FLANNERY O'CONNOR AWARD FOR SHORT FICTION

NO LIE LIKE LOVE



STORIES BY Paul Rawlins

VISIT…

No Lie Like Love

WINNER OF THE

FLANNERY O'CONNOR

AWARD FOR

SHORT FICTION

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FOR ALEX AND JOANNA.

AND FOR DARRELL.

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And lest I forget: my family for both encouraging and enduring me; the gang from the carrels 1989–1992; Val, Tory, and Henry—among the kindest of critics; the Men of Entropy; and Andy and Ana, always.

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Contents

No Lie Like Love 1

Big Texas 14

The Matter of These Hours 31

Big Where I Come From 44

August—Staying Cool 54

Home and Family 69

Good for What Ails You 84

Slangfontein 98

Still Life with Father 120

Boys 128

Kokopelli 144

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No Lie Like Love

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No Lie Like Love

Down Theil Road outside of Washtucna, Washington, the cobalt blue of the south horizon at sunset marks the far-off line the sailing men of Christopher Columbus feared. A mile off West 26, first to the north, then to the south, you'll see white houses, and they'll each have a barn and a couple of silos, a windmill, and a pine windbreak. And around it all, in front to the highway and behind back to the edge of the world, is grain and grain and grain.

It's two hundred plus miles to Seattle, and that sunset takes up a curved third of the sky in oranges at the middle, through dirty roses, and into gray violets and blue. The whole outdoors curves with the line of the sky like an amphitheater, and you'll see a tractor and harrow in silhouette on a hill for contour to add to the ramshackle lonely off West 26.

Mauren Cowley, the girl I was seeing last summer, wondered who put up phone lines along every mile of highway and down every crossroad. It breaks my heart to think about it. And I will not, not for anything in this world right up to the very edge, stay here and be a farmer.

Dad thinks I'll come around and study agricultural science here at WSU.

"A college degree is worth something these days," he says. "Everything is agri-business now. College will gear you up for the market end of things."

He sees a future in organic farming.

"The people want it," he says. They want food that's clean and safe, environmentally responsible, au naturel. If they want it cut with a sickle and bound in shocks stacked like little sheds, he'll oblige if it adds up to a nickel more a bushel net. My dad is a farmer who works the land. He loves it like a tool, not for how it smells after rain or how it feels to crumble a clod of it between his fingers—not if that clod has too much clay or sand; not if there are too many stones or there is too much alkali. No one abuses the land like farmers, who pour their crankcase oil down a ditch bank or use old tin rubbish for landfill and leave rusting machinery to rot. It's the farmers who erect and string and repair endless lines of fence, chopping up the countryside in what amounts to a bigger task than the telephone lines all down Highway 26.

"What do you know about it?" my dad said to me once.

"As much as I ever will," I told him straight.

• • •

Last summer, on Tuesday nights and Friday nights, I drove West 26 to see Mauren Cowley, the short-order girl at Mackenzie's Drive-in. I'd take her home so she could shower off the grease smell and change. Sometimes I'd hang out with her little brother while I waited and shoot frogs with his .22. He didn't care whether I or anybody else took Mauren out or not. He bummed rides in my convertible, swearing that he could drive while Mauren dried her hair.

Then Mauren and I would drive the forty-five miles down 26 into Othello to be someplace different. We'd drive past wheat and into hay and the sprinkling pipes along Irby Road, stretched out like high kickers arm in arm, swirling water out in feathers and crawling on their wheels. By the time we were over the tracks and past the old elevators by Lucy Road, the water in the fields was flashing like high

beams out of the end of the rows, and I'd play the stereo so loud Mauren and I couldn't talk, while we blasted down the highway till the flashing yellow STOP HERE at the weigh station and then the flashing red at the crossroad for Othello and Yakima or Moses Lake. Then I would turn the music down and ask Mauren what she wanted to do.

Mauren Cowley would shrug; then we would go eat and then most times see a movie.

• • •

I liked Mauren Cowley without ever meaning to and without ever loving her. Mauren Cowley was dumb and she had a horsy face. She looked walleyed when she had her hair pulled back, the way she wore it when she was slopping together shakes and dagwood sandwiches at Mackenzie's. Which is where I met her because you wouldn't meet her anyplace else. She looked good from a distance, through the glass of the kitchen window from the gas pumps. She looked like some mousey-haired girl in a pink T-shirt and rolled-up jeans who you didn't know.

Inside, I was disappointed by her horsy face, but by the time I got home I wasn't remembering her as being so bad. When I went back the next week, she looked more tan, which seemed to help, and so did some of the hair that had slipped out of the ponytail.

I said hello when I paid for the gas, and I looked at the name on her blue badge. I asked her could I get a cheeseburger.

"Uh-huh," Mauren said.

While Mauren got started on my quarter-pound double cheese at the grill, a short woman in cat-eye glasses and an apron came out of the Ladies. She asked had I been helped.

"Mauren's fixing me up," I said. Mauren stopped, and if you can know someone's smiling while their back's still turned, I'll say she did.

Cat-eyes rang me up after Mauren finished, and I asked what time they closed.

Cat-eyes squinted and checked my receipt in her head.

"Eleven o'clock," she said. "Twelve on Fridays."

Mauren Cowley came out about 11:20. Cat-eyes came out behind her and locked the door. A fat man in a pickup was waiting for one of them.

Cat-eyes looked straight at me and she said, "You need a ride home, Mauren?"

"No," Mauren said.

"I'm her cousin," I said from across the parking lot.

"Like hell," Cat-eyes said. She got in the truck with the fat man, and they sat with the motor running and the headlights off.

I walked over and asked Mauren if she needed a ride, and she told me no.

"Do you work every night?" I said.

"No."

"What nights don't you work?"

"It changes."

"What nights usually? What nights next week?"

"Tuesday," she said. "And Friday or Saturday."

"Do you want to go somewhere Tuesday?" I said. Mauren shrugged, and I edged up beside her.

"Who's that?" I said. Cat-eyes was watching, so I pointed at her.

"Clara," Mauren said.

"She looks like the wrath of God."

"I work with Becca sometimes," Mauren said. The fat man switched on his headlights and pinned us to the wall like escaping prisoners. I turned my back to them and stood in front of Mauren.

"What time are you off Tuesday?" I said.

"Five o'clock," she told me. "In the afternoon."

• • •

All summer long we blasted down 26 with the music loud enough to make our ears bleed and the wind blowing out whatever Mauren had done with her hair, until she stopped doing anything at all more than washing out the smell of the grill and tying it back into its ponytail.

We ate at drive-ins. Mauren liked it when we went to an old-type A&W where you ordered over a speaker in the lighted menu and the girls brought your food out on a tray they hung from the window of your car. She liked to make the orders difficult. She'd order without pickles and want root beer and ice in separate cups.

"What do you do that for?" I said. "You like pickles."

Mauren shrugged. "Sometimes," she said. She'd watch the girls in their short, candy-striped skirts and chew at the corner of her mouth.

Then mostly we'd see a movie, where Mauren would do everything she was supposed to do. She would laugh when things were funny, and when things got close she would squeeze my arm or my hand, and if the movie got scary she would scream and sometimes pick her feet up off the floor, as if under her chair was a space like under her bed, with hands waiting to reach out and grab her and pull her down to someplace dark. We would kiss a little in the movie, and then more somewhere along the way home. Sometimes back behind the old elevators by Lucy Road, or down some other crossroad and out in a field, with the top always down and the stars always up. And once on the train tracks, waiting to feel the tremors and the rumble.

• • •

The rain was the most lonely thing out on our place. I would lie on my stomach and watch out the front door. The house was dark as twilight inside, and the rain outside was cold and fell in big drops and straight lines. It fell on the fields all the way to the edge of the world.

I would call Mauren at work. I would try to make my voice sound like I thought her father's would, and I would ask to speak with her please.

Becca would call for her, or Cat-eyes would bark, "Mauren."

"What are you doing?" Mauren would say after she said hello.

"Nothing," I would tell her.

"Why aren't you working?" she would say.

"It's raining. Why aren't you?"

"Troy," she'd say quiet into the phone, "I'm going to get in trouble."

"So?" I'd say.

"Troy, I gotta go."

"Go," I'd say. "Good-bye."

I'd call her back all afternoon, and Mauren would be scrambling to answer the phone. She would make up things to say out loud for Becca or Cat-eyes to hear. She would say, "No, she isn't working this shift. I don't know, but I can check the schedule." And I would tell her, yes, check the schedule. I would tell her sometimes, "Check and see when Mauren Cowley is working," and she'd read back to me her own days on for the next week: "Monday, Tuesday, Friday days; Wednesday, Thursday, Saturday close."

She would quote prices to me.

"That would be $2.99. Plus tax. It's on a special." Always plus tax. Or it would be the gas price.

"A dollar twenty-three. But there's three cents a gallon discount for cash, and that would be a dollar twenty."

And a hundred times she only said, "I'm sorry, you must have the wrong number. This is 7879."

Becca would beat Mauren to the phone sometimes and tell me that Mauren had run off with a trucker or something. Cat-eyes would gripe at Mauren about how she wasn't getting paid to talk on the phone and this was a business number, hand her the phone every time, then scream at her when she hung up, Mauren told me.

If I picked up Mauren after I had called her all afternoon, Becca would tell me I was silly.

Mauren always said, "I'm going to lose my job."

"You don't like your job," I'd say.

"It's the only job there is."

We had rain almost two straight weeks in June. And I lay in the dark, calling Mauren at work to get her to the edge of trouble. Mackenzie's was the only job there was.

• • •

Mauren asked questions like a baby doll, like nobody had told her anything, not ever in her life. She asked me once, "What's special about unleaded gasoline?"

"It's lighter," I told her.

She asked me where I was going to college in the fall.

"Let's go see," I said.

Mauren put on my sunglasses, and we drove a hundred miles an hour to just outside of Pullman. We crept once around campus for a look and then turned around and rocketed back to Washtucna.

"What are you going to take at college?" Mauren asked me.

"Women," I said. It's what I always said.

"What else?" Mauren said.

"I don't know. Maybe business, maybe science, some sort of engineering."

"I'd like to go to travel school," Mauren said. "My dad says go learn to cut hair, but I'd like to go to travel school and learn all about traveling." Her dad did say that; he said he wished he knew how to cut hair. He would set up a shop in his spare room and barber for three dollars a head on weekends and make a mint.

"On who?" I'd ask Mauren.

"Have you been in an airplane?" Mauren said.

I said, "Yes." I lied.

"Where did you go?"

"Texas," I said. "To see my uncle."

And once, while we were parked out in a field, with the sky down low being a tease about rain, my lips were bruised from kissing and cut one place from a jagged crown Mauren had on one front tooth. Mauren had her legs stretched out over my lap and was trying to roll the window up and down with her foot.

She said, "Sometimes can you wish for things and then still get them?"

"Not that I've ever seen," I said. She reached her hand over the car door without thinking about it and tugged up a stalk of grain.

"No," she said. "It doesn't ever seem like it." She was weaving the stalk into her hair, winding it around the ponytail till the head of grain stood up like a single feather in an Indian bonnet.

"Pocahontas," I said, "white squaw."

"Didn't you wish for this car?" she said, looking around the field. "Isn't this the kind of car you wish for?"

"No," I said. "I bought it."

I taught Mauren how to downshift and power into a turn, showed her peeling out and burning rubber, made her pump gas and check the oil.

When we caught air coming off bumps down the dirt roads, she said, "Isn't it bad for the car?"

"When it's gone, it's gone," I told her.

I taught Mauren how to swear, something she could use.

• • •

I worked all day that summer for wages from my dad. I rode in a high-cabbed tractor with my shirt off and the radio turned up and chopped grain for miles. I could drive half an hour in one direction and cut a twenty-foot swath that added up to nothing. If I stared at the horizon, the edge, I'd be standing still, like I was on a giant paddle wheel, and the grain moved past in a river along my side and underneath me.

I used to climb up on the cab and yell. I bounced up and down in the seat till I broke the springs, and I jerked the steering wheel at the same time, trying to yank it free. I spit out the window at the grain and took leaks on it and practiced all the words I'd teach Mauren and make her yell out the car into the wind on Highway 26.

• • •

Mauren and I went to Othello to see fireworks on the Fourth of July. She was late getting off work. I waited for her outside of Mackenzie's, lighting off firecrackers in a ditch down the road with a bunch of little kids.

"We've been swamped," Mauren said. Her hair stuck to her face and she flapped her T-shirt because it was sticking, too. "Clara wasn't going to let me go."

Clara was watching us through the glass, and I held up a dud firecracker like I was going to flip it at the gas pumps for her to see, until she started around the counter.

"Let's go," I said.

Mauren's family was loading into a pickup when I pulled onto the lawn.

"I'll hurry," Mauren said. "What time do they start?"

"When it gets dark," I told her.

After her family left, I walked into Mauren's house. I heard the shower going, and a radio. The radio was in Mauren's room, the one she shared with two little sisters. There were bunks, and under an open window with yellow curtains a twin bed that would be Mauren's. The bed was white with a metal-gate headboard like in old hospitals. The room was picked up neat except for Mauren's jeans and T-shirt on the floor.

When the shower stopped behind me, I waited for her, standing in the doorway. I had never seen Mauren even in shorts yet. She took her time, and she came out in jeans and a sleeveless sweater, toweling her hair. She stopped when she saw me. "Did everybody leave?" she said.

"Yes," I said. She waited for me to move before she walked into the bedroom. I stood back in the doorway, and Mauren put on her canvas deck shoes.

"Do you like fireworks?" she said.

I shrugged.

Mauren pulled her hair back into the ponytail and daubed on lip gloss. "Do you want to eat here? There's salads and things. My mom left a note," she said.

"You don't want to," I said.

"We could," Mauren said. Then she shrugged away the offer and dropped the lip gloss and some gum into her purse.

We watched fireworks from the car, picking through cartons of Chinese food she had wanted to try, but she didn't like it, only the little strips of meat and the pea pods. The fireworks, the gold ones that hung and dripped, made me think of willow trees, I told Mauren. She was leaning on my shoulder, sucking on snow peas and pointing.

"What makes the colors?" she said.

"It's minerals. Sulphur is the blue; phosphorus is white; cadmium makes red." I made it up. "I don't know what makes the green."

"Sugar," she said. "Sugar burns green."

I didn't know if it did or not.

"My mom's going to Seattle," Mauren said after another burst, the ones that pop into screaming tadpoles in the sky.

"What for?"

"Dancing," Mauren said. "She goes every year. She meets her old girlfriends and they go out dancing and see movies and flirt with men." We watched a huge blast, a ball of red, white, and blue that exploded out and down and down so that we ducked.

"What does your old man think of it?" I said.

"He sends her," Mauren said. "He doesn't like to dance." I figured then Mauren's father was about as dumb as his daughter.

"Do you ever go?" I said.

"No," she said.

I told Mauren my dad didn't even take the holiday off. Her father was a mailman of some sort, but not the kind that delivered house to house.

"He picks it up in Pullman," Mauren said. "He takes mail to all the little towns."

She said did I know their cat had died of old age.

She said she liked Washtucna.

A white comet went straight up from the ground and didn't explode—it just tipped over and went out.

We sat till midnight listening to the radio play in the dark, watching the cars pass. We drove home at the speed limit, with our eyes open for cops.

• • •

Mauren started wearing rings on her thumbs, then two or three on a finger, stacked above and below the knuckle. She kept them in her purse and strung them on or swapped them around, and that would keep her attention for ten or twenty minutes while we drove.

"They look like pull tops," I said. They looked like silver, but they stuck to magnets. They would suck up in the car vac like loose change. I'd find them down my shirt when I undressed at nights. When I gave them back to Mauren, she'd dump them in her purse.

Sometime she switched her gum to sugarless and bought sunglasses of her own.

Mauren is the first girl I slept with, which is a funny way to say it, since there wasn't any sleeping. It was down by the grain elevators, just off the tracks, waiting for the train again. I thought it would be like the music, when it's so good you want to take it inside of you and the only thing you can do is turn it louder and then louder, until your stomach starts to shake and you're waiting to come apart. I thought it would be like that.

She's the only girl I've ever slept with; then she cried on the way home.

• • •

Sometimes, after I'd drop Mauren in Washtucna, or on nights when I couldn't see her, Sunday nights, I drove the road myself. I would putter down to Washtucna like taking a lap up to the starting line, and then I would drive the distance back to Othello as fast as I could, and sometimes without lights, which was like holding my breath, waiting for something to happen. And I wanted to be standing alongside the road to hear myself tear by, like a rush, a bullet. And to hear the screaming fade, and to reach out and touch the red flash without breaking my hand, only burning the tips of my fingers.

Sometimes I imagined dying in a crash. Mauren would come to my funeral and those little silver rings would drop off her fingers into my casket.

• • •

Mauren told me in August, "I don't want you to come see me anymore."

"Why, do I scare the customers?" I said.

Mauren only looked at me funny.

"What's the matter?" I said.

She looked down at her shoes that were fuzzy from the soap she used to mop the drive-in floor. "I've got a boyfriend," she said.

"What boyfriend?" I said. "Who?" She wouldn't tell me anything about it.

Her dad came in the pickup and waved to me. Then he looked at Mauren, looked puzzled, and she climbed in. I shrugged, and he waved again and drove Mauren Cowley home.

• • •

On Sunday at home I washed the car and listened to Dad yammer off the front steps. The same old thing.

"Pull up the Lincoln and do that, too." After the soap and wax, halfway into the buffing, he'd say, "Do it right."

In the afternoon I drove out to the motocross at Washtucna. Mauren's brother was there, like she said he always was on a Sunday, nosing around and trying to score rides. He was sitting on a Kawasaki decked out in muddy chrome and lime-green plastic.

"How old is your sister, really?" I said.

"Fifteen," he said. "Hey, what happened, man? I seen her new boy."

"Nothing," I said.

"Hey, check this," he said. He laid out on the bike with his face stuck over the handlebars, gritting his teeth in the imaginary wind while he twisted the throttle and squeezed the clutch.

• • •

There is no lie in this world like the lie about love. The lies of science explain it best. Valence shell electron pair repulsion theory and gravity and the polar ends of magnetic fields. The logics of repulsion and attraction and the fascination between two bodies—that I underlined in a notebook because I thought I knew what it meant. I'm learning all the things I didn't know about the world now, taking physics and chemistry. I'm pulling mediocre grades, having a hard time with the math. Dad says no more meal ticket next year. He pats the hood of my car and says there's tuition and books, right there.

There are two things you do here in college, and they are the same everywhere, I guess, and they are to drink and to get laid. I can't drink.

I get sick. My body has no tolerance, not even for beer. I've known this since I was fifteen, and at first I tried to get around it. I drank and I got sick, but I told myself it was like lifting weights and building up your wind with distance running, but I still got sick every time, so I quit.

And I've cut out the other for a while, too. Not that it isn't easy to come by, not that it isn't dropping down from the trees and crawling in through the window. Not that I don't know my roommate's lacrosse stick outside the curtains means I'm on my own to find anywhere to go but home for the next hour. But I've figured something out, something about the lie of it all.

Sometimes when I think of Washtucna, and the fields, and the roads with the telephone lines swinging down them off West 26, I swear I'll just keep going east. Down to Cheyenne and Chicago, Cleveland, all the "C" towns, not for "Cowley," but just because one comes after the other in a line.

And I think that someday maybe I'll be in love, and that could make the difference.

Big Texas

There are nine of us at a noisy Italian restaurant for Al and J.B.'s anniversary party. Al is at the end of the table, where the waitresses have cleared room for his wheelchair. Rome at Home has the best-looking waitresses in San Antonio, Al tells me, college girls that glow like the pictures that come in photo frames. They wear Packer green aprons and white shirts with a thin pinstripe. Al slips an arm around one when she drifts too close and asks her to recommend something. She scribbles on her order pad and smiles, trying to scoot away.

J.B. sits on Al's right, and I am on his left. There are three women around the table, each of whom, Al and J.B. guarantee, is ready to leave her husband or fiancé the moment I give the nod.

"Give it up," I've told them it's got to be a hundred times.

"Duane-o," Al always says to me, "you need our help. You're a lonely man."

Right now J.B. is ignoring Al and the waitress while she goes on telling stories.

"I knew a whole family whose name was Gay; they changed their name to Chandler," she's saying. "They had a son named Gary and another named Jay. No lie, Jay Gay." J.B. twirls the ends of her bread sticks in Parmesan after each bite, swatting Al away from her plate

when he tries to help himself. J.B. is short enough to wear girls' sizes. She has eyes the color of old coins and her black hair tugged back off her ears in a pewter clasp. She blows over a spoonful of minestrone chunky with garden vegetables.

"Damn, I want to be Italian," she says. "That must be why I married the dago lover here."

"Nobody did it like the Romans," Al says.

"Pizza," J.B. challenges. "You ever had Italian pizza?"

"Trash," Al agrees. Al is Italian-Irish, the lover and the fighter and the drinker. He's been all of them, all at once. Now he's a part-time draftsman for an industrial architect and a regular at real estate and positive-attitude seminars. He's in a wheelchair after a skiing accident three winters ago. I was there when it happened. They let me on the helicopter, and I held onto his hand on the way to the hospital.

"Can't feel the cold, Sass," he said to me. "Can't be good, can't feel the cold."

"You don't want to feel it," I said.

"I'm through," he said. "Hey," he yelled up to the pilot, "thanks."

Al is excited now about a gift he's gotten for J.B. He hands her a long white box, like a wristwatch would come in, and she leans over to kiss him while they each have a hand on one end of the present. She folds back the tissue paper and the cotton inside and holds up a pendant on a thong of braided black leather. In the middle, hanging horizontally from two gold bars, is a crystal the size of a fuse. The ends are capped in gold, and through the middle of the crystal runs a thin line of purplish-red that is almost black.

"What is it?" J.B. says.

"Blood," Al says. "My blood."

"Oh, sick," J.B. says.

"No, it's good blood," Al says. It's from the test they took to get a marriage license.

"I want a divorce," J.B. says. "I can't live with this man." It's true, sometimes she can't. Sometimes nobody can.

I give them a stainless steel wok. They are all the rage this year in Seattle.

• • •

When Al called from their new place in San Antonio—a bungalow he and J.B. are only house-sitting, their third place in a year—he talked like they were living in a ranch house as big as anything you'd see on *Dallas*. They've got automatic sprinklers, a pool, and a water bed the size of the Gulf of Mexico. After he finished going on about the place, he told me over the phone, "J.B. says you've got to stop licking your wounds and start paying us some attention."

"I'm just busy," I said.

"With what?" Al asked me. He knew he had a point.

"Therapy. Things," I told him.

"Why don't you come down around our anniversary and stay at the house a few days?"

I said maybe I'd come for their anniversary party. Their second. Maybe stay the week.

"J.B. says no maybes. Dinner's at eight. Bring a present."

It's not like I don't have the time. I'm washed up in professional football, walking with a cane still months after the last effort at rebuilding my knee, a regular bionic man. I told myself while I stuffed a suitcase with T-shirts and pain pills that this trip would be good for me. J.B. would inject me with pep and Al would be full of understanding. "You've got one more good leg than I've got," he'd say, rearing back on two wheels in his chair. By the time I was in the cab for the airport, I was excited to be getting away. I could fly to Texas for Al and J.B., which is the name she has gone by all her life, J.B. standing for Jill Bailey, though her last name now is Toscano.

I am their best friend.

• • •

"Check this," Al says. He has a special yellow cart with rubber treads in the rear for the beach. He opens a hatch on the back and one on the side underneath the seat. "Five horsepower."

"Sweet," I say.

"Tupelo honey," he agrees. He flexes and tells me how much he's bench-pressing.

"Two forty," he says. "My squats still suck."

"Give it time," I tell him.

"What was your max?"

"Three something, I guess," I say while J.B. comes in with car keys and sunglasses.

"You aren't taking that?" She's pointing at Al's crawler.

"Just showing off," Al says. "Thought Duane-o might want one for the supermarket." He whirs down the hall on his treads to get his wheelchair. His boss called two nights ago about this emergency trip. Al doesn't do much, he tells me. His boss just seems to like his company.

"He tells me these trips are boring," J.B. says. "He just sits around playing cards and looking at dirty books."

"You can do that at home," I agree.

Al is singing "Your left, your left, your left, right left" while he rolls into the bathroom.

"Come on, mister," J.B. hollers, watching the bathroom door. When Al rolls back out, J.B. picks up a duffel bag and we follow him outside.

"I'm leaving you the 'stang, Duane-o," Al says. "Keep it under a hundred in Mexico."

"Get it over a hundred anywhere," I say. J.B. tosses Al's duffel into their van while he waits for the lift. I watch him rise into the van like an astronaut on a slow gurney elevator.

"Come see me in Louisiana," he says. "We'll get us a mess of good Cajun food."

J.B. gives him a peck good-bye through the driver's side window.

"Last call," Al says.

J.B. steps back and blows him a slow kiss off her palm.

• • •

Before she goes to work in the morning, J.B. leaves me breakfast on the wooden island in the kitchen. She labels everything with little

notes and arrows. The grapefruit says "Texas citrus"; the English muffins say "Five minutes in here" with an arrow to the toaster oven. The fridge door has a note on pink stationery, "Meet me at LaCasita for lunch, 1:15—J.B." Another note underneath it says "You don't have a car. I'll pick you up. 1:05."

Al calls about ten.

"*Hola,*" he says. "How'd you sleep?"

"On my back," I say. "How's Louisiana?"

"Full of alligators. Any calls?"

"Just you," I say. "What's the story?"

"Just bored here," Al says. "Wondering if J.B. was around."

"Isn't she supposed to be at work?" I say.

"You never know. Sorry about this trip."

"A job's a job."

"Yeah," Al says. "What are you going to do all day?"

"I guess I'm meeting J.B. for lunch."

"See, you're having fun already. You ought to move down here."

I laugh.

"Texas," Al says, "it's not just for cowboys anymore. Tell J.B. I called."

I hang up with Al and take a swim in the pool in the backyard. I charge in off the board, which dips deep under my weight, and alternate laps between a heavy American crawl and a sloppy backstroke with a mostly underwater frog kick. I got to like swimming in therapy, the sound of everything muffled underwater. I had a volunteer aide who assistant-coached a local high school team, a blonde-haired water baby I could put like a shot halfway across the diving area.

She told me after two months the trainers had warned her at the beginning I might get depressed and difficult or maybe violent. "Are you going to?" she said. She was sitting on the side of the pool with a towel wrapped around her waist and her hair cut off short because it was so damaged from chlorine.

"Me?" I said. "I'm going all the way. L.A. in '84." I showed her my flip turn and she shook her head.

"What are you going to do now, really?" she wanted to know.

I hooked my elbows on the side of the pool and squinted out at the glare coming off the water.

"Hell if I know," I said.

I lie back on the rough cement now and let the water puddle up around me while I dry in the Texas sun. I started steroids the summer before college that have left my skin pitted with acne scars. I haven't dropped the weight yet I was planning to over the past year. I try a few sit-ups until the cement scratches and burns my skin like a rash. I look like a wet, bleached bear.

I played six games and two and a half quarters into my second season. The offensive line was pulling left. I'd shucked off my man and was adjusting to the counter when the low chop came. Now I'm supposed to be a millionaire on paper, but I can't drive a car with a standard transmission.

• • •

J.B. picks me up for lunch wearing blue culottes and a sheer white blouse. She has a navy blazer thrown in the backseat of the car. Her hair is pinned back behind her ears, and she looks executive, up and coming. She orders me a plate of steak fajitas, heavy flour tortillas full of sirloin strips with tomato wedges and bell peppers.

"Tex-Mex," she says. She leans far over the table and cups a hand under her chin while she eats to keep salsa spills off her clothes. I burn my tongue on the first bite.

"Hot," she warns me.

"What do you do all day?" I say.

"P.R. and alumni stuff at U.T. San Antonio." She shivers and says the air-conditioning is up too high in her office.

"How'd you wind up with this place?" I ask her, meaning the house.

"One of the professors on study abroad. Al knew him for about a week before he left. They worked out at the gym together."

"You've only been down here for a couple of months."

J.B. shrugs. "It's a good change from Houston. Are you going to stay in Seattle?"

"For now."

"Suit yourself. Do you want to come shopping this afternoon?"

"What for?" I say.

"I don't know. Lingerie—I told Al I'd get him a surprise." She looks at me steady and pops a chip in her mouth, warm from hot oil and the sun. I shrug if off and watch traffic in the street. It's just J.B.

"Lighten up, Big D," she tells me, laughing. "This is your vacation, tell me what you want to do."

I take a minute to think about it.

"Get a tan," I tell her.

"Sunday," she promises, "we'll go to the beach."

• • •

The next afternoon I spend looking at pictures in photo albums from the stacks of boxes in the spare bedroom. Al's got them all the way back to our high school freshman year when we were the same height in our black away uniforms. Then it's us in college as Washington Huskies, me with another hundred thirty pounds and eight inches, an Outland Trophy candidate my senior year, and Al a third-string wide-out before he quit. Another album is full of wedding photos. Al's got a slick black tux and his hair oiled back, and J.B. is in the only floor-length dress I have ever seen her wear, with a double strand of Japanese pearls around her neck that came out of my signing bonus with the Seahawks. The candid ones show Al behind the drums with the band, J.B. getting dipped by her father on the dance floor, me with a bridesmaid under each arm.

Al and J.B. are together because of me, because J.B. tutored me my junior and senior years.

"You aren't dumb," she said. "You're just not smart." Then she said no, she was teasing me, it was my study habits, and we could fix that. She told me to study the same subject at the same time of day, to review what I read the day before, then thought to try showing me how to speed-read, which I caught on to, pacing with my finger and reading faster and faster until I didn't hear the words in my head anymore, only saw pictures.

"Is this how you get your grades," I asked her, "doing this kind of stuff?"

"No," she said. She didn't even have to try, and then somewhere along the way I guess she even forgot how. She lost her scholarship the year after she met Al.

I took her out once, to a hockey game. We went out for something to eat after, and she looked at me across the booth and said, "Duane, Duane," like it was too bad that this was my name, then ordered a chicken sandwich. She was in love again with somebody she couldn't have, like she always seemed to be.

"It's too hard," she said. "I'm going to give it up. What about you?"

I told her about Al, which wasn't an answer but was the only thing I could think of, him living up in a borrowed cabin at Snoqualmie Pass, working half-days on the ski patrol and hotfooting it after snow bunnies.

"Introduce me," J.B. said.

• • •

After I've had enough of memory lane, I make a phone call to a buddy who isn't home and end up asleep on the floor with some of J.B.'s old disco albums on the stereo.

I wake up to J.B. slamming doors and cracking ice out of trays in the kitchen. She's changed into cut-off shorts and an oversized T-shirt I sent down once printed with the Seattle skyline. She sets a glass of ice and a can of diet soda on the floor next to me and slops into a chair across the room. She raises her glass, part salute, part toast.

"Up yours," she says before she drinks.

I roll over. "Watch," I say. I pour the soda, then crush the can between my thumb and middle finger, collapsing it with my index finger in back.

"I hate this job," she says.

"Quit," I tell her.

"Right," she says, "and live on love."

In between cursing at the world, J.B is wincing and twisting in her chair. She started having muscle spasms just after Al was in his acci-

dent, before they even got married. Al calls them sympathy pains. They're creepy the way they started and the way they come and go. J.B. says it's like living with a ghost she can feel as it slips inside her. They've kept her up nights, flat on her stomach and in tears on the kitchen floor so she wouldn't wake up Al.

"Is this them?" I say now.

"No," J.B. says. "This is left over from Houston. Everybody feels like this at six o'clock. That's why most people are sitting in bars this time of day. Can you imagine having to come home to kids and dinner to fix on top of everything else?"

"Here," I say. I sit up and pat the couch.

"What?" she says.

"Sports medicine," I tell her.

I toss the throw pillows on the floor. On her way across the room J.B. scoops one up to stuff under her chin and lies down on her stomach.

"Sunny-side up," she says. I take a handful of muscle on either side of her neck and squeeze like I'm wringing out a towel. J.B. swears and calls me dirty names in Spanish. I dig my thumbs into her shoulders and she yells, "Ow."

"This is good for you," I tell her.

"You'll turn me into a cripple," she says.

"You'll fit right in," I say. I start down her back, cracking vertebrae while J.B. bites the pillow and kicks her feet. Her back isn't two of my spread hands wide, and I know her tan runs deep and even all the way down. I work her back like I'm fixing something, putting all the parts into place. I work up to down, outside to in, whistling while I roll my knuckles over her spine, going over the muscles out loud.

"Which one's that?" J.B. says. "I don't remember."

"This one," I say. I poke and she grunts. "You sound like a lineman," I tell her.

"I feel like the ball," she says. She's lying still now.

"You still running?" I say.

"Mmm mm," she says. "Bicycle. Fifteen miles every morning. But high gear. What about you?"

"I swim. I look like Tennessee Tuxedo's friend. What's his name?"

"Chumley," J.B. says. The walrus.

"That's him," I say. "I read, though. I've got subscriptions to fifteen different magazines. I got hooked on *Redbook* waiting at the doctor's office."

"That's good for you. I should have stayed in college."

"I thought you were going back."

"Maybe," she says. "I should get an MBA or something. We can get half tuition at U.T. now. Al should go."

"He only went to play football and ski and chase women."

"How come Al didn't stick with football?"

"I don't know," I say, even if I do. "The coach didn't play him much."

"Al screwed-off too much in college. He's always been like that."

"You think he should have played football?"

"I think he should have done something. You knew what you wanted. You worked hard and got it."

"I didn't have anything else I was good at," I say.

"And Al was too good at everything," J.B. says.

She holds still until I finish. When I swat her butt and sit back on the floor, she drops an arm over the side of the couch and turns her head to look at me. "We've been worried about you. You never call."

"I'm sorry."

"No you're not," she says, then stays quiet for a minute. "You should shave off your mustache." She holds a finger under my nose to check the effect.

"My face looks bald," I say.

"We'll give you a haircut, too. Come on," she says.

I don't want to play about getting handsome. The teasing, foreplay, it's all part of J.B.'s surefire method of boosting self-esteem. It's a gift

she has with men; it's second nature, she doesn't even know when she's doing it.

"Leave it," I tell her.

"Duane Sass." She says it "Duane's ass." She has meanness in her, too.

"I guess that's where I am now, isn't it?"

"You're going to coach or something, aren't you?" she says.

"For those who can't do."

"It's somewhere to land," J.B. reminds me.

We talk about things until the sun goes down. J.B. complains about her job, probes me about my love life, tells me stories about Al. He thinks maybe after he's finished with this project he might quit his drafting job and start something else. He wants to get his pilot's license and take J.B. up with him to work the rudders. He can't seem to settle down. In the half-dark of the room with the sky over the back fence the color of peaches, J.B. asks what's the craziest thing Al and I ever did.

"We robbed a store," I say. I don't think before I say it. I don't know why I tell her.

"When?" she says. She doesn't believe it.

"When we were kids, eleven or twelve."

"For real?"

"Yeah," I say.

"What for?"

"Money."

J.B.'s sat up Indian style with her feet on the couch.

"What happened?" she says.

"Nothing. We didn't get caught."

"Did you use a gun and everything?"

"Just a pellet gun," I say. "It was the clerk's idea. He was this crazy kid about fifteen. He was in on it."

"I don't believe it." J.B. swings at me with a couch cushion. "What did you do with the money? How much was it?"

"Spent it. It was only thirty, forty bucks."

"Ten dollars apiece?"

"It was supposed to be more. It was a dumb thing," I say.

"You're a couple of felons," she says. "What else has Al been hiding from me? Don't even tell me you were lovers or something."

"No way, *hombre*," I tell her.

"You robbed a store." J.B. laughs while she gets up and heads for the kitchen.

"You hungry, *bandito?*" she says. She wants to know did we wear disguises, panty hose over our heads or anything, and whether there are any intelligent police in the part of Idaho where we grew up. The phone rings, and I answer. Al says hello.

"They're onto us, Rocky," I say, and he wonders what's going on.

"Is that Al?" J.B. says, scrambling across the kitchen. "Give me the phone."

• • •

J.B. takes me to the ocean off Padre Island, where it's still early for the tourist season and the beach is almost empty for a Sunday. We drive the Mustang up onto the sand and change into swimming suits in little outdoor shower stalls, J.B. talking to me over the wall all the time about moving out of Texas when Al's commitment on this project is up. I wear a touristy shirt covered with green parrots. My knee is crossed with red scars as thick as pencils and swollen like veins. J.B. comes out in a flowered lavalava and a silly straw sombrero.

We roll out beach towels down by the shore, and I smear suntan oil that smells like coconuts over J.B.'s Indian-brown back and shoulders. "Al doesn't want to look for another job," she's saying. "He wants to invest. He sits around reading the financial pages all morning, thinks Ronald Reagan is going to save the free world."

"Where would you go?" I say.

"California, Colorado, wherever there's money."

"We always used to talk about ranching in Montana. Or once Al was going to go up to the Yukon for a while."

"He's getting fussy," J.B. says. I dig my heels into the sand and let her coat my back with sunblock.

"Go play," she says when she's finished. She tugs off the lavalava and rolls over to lie in what little sun she can find.

I swim my clumsy strokes in the warm tide of the Gulf, with the sun in and out behind clouds. A storm is waiting out over the ocean where the sky is black. There is one fisherman on the beach, an old man in hip waders, casting out into the surf. J.B. is on the other side of a little white dune where he can't see her. Neither one knows the other is there.

J.B. is getting restless, I can tell, tired of being a good sport. She and Al came to Texas because neither one of them had been here before. I remember how it happened. They took a map and crossed off anywhere either of them had lived—Idaho, the West Coast, Nevada, Ohio—and all the states with bad winters. Then they both decided they didn't like the Deep South. Texas seemed bigger than everything they had left.

"They've even got two football teams," J.B. said, when she and Al were telling me about their plans.

"New York has three," I told her. "California has four."

I am on my back, barely thinking, when I drift into a small school of blue jellyfish. I feel their stings all at once, all over my body, like I'm rolling in a field of electric nettles. I'm thrashing in water deeper than my head, floundering like my first days in the pool. I don't remember yelling, but J.B. runs from the beach, taking the surf in the high strides of a hurdler to help pull me from the ocean. I am barely conscious by the time we get back home.

• • •

I have a bad reaction to the stings. J.B. puts me up in a back bedroom, where I am sometimes awake, then lost again in the green sea of the Gulf. I know Al has come home because I can hear him rolling in the hallways sometimes when I am half awake, though sometimes it's only a thing I imagine, like the hallway is hours long, and he rumbles down it with the endless spin of a tumble dryer. He comes in to call me Jacques Cousteau, to tell me I don't look so good, other things I don't remember. He turns on a ceiling fan when I am hot and switches it off

again when I get sweaty and cold. I know a doctor has come by at least once.

J.B. brings me food. "Come on, babe," she says while she sits me up against pillows and feeds me with a spoon, nursing me back to health. "Hey," she whispers in the mornings, "*mi amor*," and brushes the hair off my forehead. She lifts up the sheets and peeks under. I have seven new welts. In dreams, J.B. takes me back down to the beach. I'm still in the bed, and she wheels me across the sand and out into the waves until we are deep enough to slide me into the water.

"Swim," she says. "You've got to swim."

On my third night I hear Al and J.B. fighting in the kitchen. I'm not sure I am all the way awake, and mostly I can't make out the words. They are both yelling. They interrupt each other, and I hear cupboard doors slap shut and the rattle of dishes and one crash. I catch the words "That's not what this is about!" from J.B. They fight for an hour while I listen, sometimes yelling, sometimes in tones I can't hear until they start to shout again. They move toward the back of the house once, J.B. first because I hear her footsteps, then Al's voice behind them. I hear one "Shhh" when they think of me lying in bed, worried they might disturb me.

It ends with J.B. off crying somewhere. Al has rolled onto the deck outside the sliding glass door that makes up one wall of my room. He's sitting with his back to me, going through something on his lap and flipping what look like playing cards between his fingers out into the pool. They twist like butterflies and drop into the water. I wait till I think he's through, until I can't hear J.B. sobbing in the other room anymore, before I hoist myself out of bed.

"Deal me in, *hombre*," I say.

"Hey, Duane-o," Al says. He wheels around to face me and slides back the door. "You alive?"

"Feel like the day after a game," I say, "bad game."

"You must have puked off ten pounds," Al says. "You want to come out?" I see my cane leaning against a chair. I strip a blanket off the

bed to wrap around me, and Al pulls a chair over next to him on the deck. I see he has a purse of J.B.'s in his lap.

"What are you playing?" I say. He digs through the purse and comes up with a credit card.

"We're sinking," he says. He spins the card into the pool with the others. He takes out a tube of lipstick and tosses it for good measure, then a brown pharmacy bottle of pills and a library card. He hangs onto a ring of keys and dumps the rest of the purse out onto the deck.

"Feel OK?" he says.

"Better."

Al's watching the pool. "Eleven thousand dollars we're in the hole for," he says.

"For what?" I say.

"General debt. I don't know, a hundred little things. What's eleven thousand to you, Sass?" he says, not to be insulting.

"You want it?" I ask him.

Al shakes his head. "The money's mostly hers, you know. I'm part-time, but that's the best I can do right now. And that might be gone the end of the summer."

"Are you two doing all right?" I say. "Other than money?"

Al does a quarter turn to look at me. He's got a fuzzy army haircut and wire-rimmed glasses that make him look like a cross between a San Quentin con and a college professor. A swarthy Italian-American with a big nose and more meat on his shoulders and arms from his workouts and his chair than he ever had from playing football. Albert Toscano is my best friend, he and J.B. together.

"Yeah," he says, "we're doing all right. Don't worry about this. What about you?"

"I'm OK," I say. "It's been a hard couple of months—been a hard year."

"I'm your man for that," Al says. "You want to stay a while amongst friends, my *casa* is your *casa*."

"I want things good for you and J.B." I say.

"Things are good, storms that make the roses grow, you know?" he says, wherever he got that from. The sprinklers have popped up. They're the slow kind that spin the water around in a fountain. They cool down the air at night around the house.

"Get married, Duane-o," Al says. "You need a wife. You need some love, companionship, regular abuse. It'll make you a new man."

"Someday," I say.

"Are you in love with my wife, Sass?" This comes out of the clear blue. It's not an accusation or a threat. He's just left us alone together for the better part of a week.

"No," I say.

"Get off it," he tells me. "You are too."

I don't like anywhere this might lead. Sure I am, or have been, but there's nothing to talk about.

"So am I," he says finally.

"You want to see something amazing?" I balance my cane on my chin. "I learned how to do that."

"I'd have come when you did the leg," Al says.

"We talked," I tell him. "You guys called. I didn't want any visitors."

"Sometimes friends are just supposed to be there, *amigo*."

"Sometimes."

"Always," Al says. He's finished his lecture and sits with his glasses in his lap. "What did you tell J.B. about that robbery stunt for?" he says at last. "I'd forgotten about it."

"I don't know."

"I can't even remember what we bought with the money."

"Junk probably. Maybe it's time to do another," I say.

Al's laughing. "They'd probably let us get away out of sympathy."

Later J.B. comes out and hands her new pendant and a small pair of needle-nose pliers to Al. He pinches together a gold loop that's broken loose, then fastens the thong around her neck and kisses her hair and shoulder.

"Didn't you hear him beating me up in there?" J.B. says to me. "Some friend." She comes over and lays her warm hand on my forehead to check for fever.

"We're out from under, babe," Al says. "Me and Duane-o are getting back into the crime biz."

I swing my cane up under my arm like a tommy gun.

"What do you want, sugar?" Al says. "You want clothes? You want diamonds? You want Gucci watches?"

"What do I want?" J.B. says. She's swiped my cane, and she rests her chin on it while she squats on the deck between us. "Let's go to Mexico for the weekend."

It's a promise of fun and adventure. It doesn't change anything, but it's all right to pretend for a while.

"I'm with you, babe," Al says. "You along for the ride, Duane-o?"

I guess I am.

And while we sit and watch, the sun goes down and all the stars come out in Texas.

The Matter of These Hours

Jan does it like this, first day back. First day. Two hundred kids bumping, squalling like sheep in a *kraal.* Prefects in their new coats the color of plums, with name badges, handshaking and pointing directions down the yellow halls. Jan does this.

He sniffs, sticks his nose up by them right there, and he says, "*Kak.*"

They're looking at him like it's the disgustingest thing, dirt on their sleeves, while Jan drinks at the fountain, cold water, and pokes the corners of his mouth with the cuff on his jacket. "I'm gonna die," he says.

We're in school.

We have to go, Jan always says. This year and then one more. We have to go to get some jobs, some like we want on the railways. Or Jan says maybe keeping shop, somewhere in Hillbrow, in town, Johannesburg, not here. Anything but on the mines. But now Jan says he's not getting any of those jobs.

Jan has got sick, don't know how. I don't know how. He says he just got it.

We're backs up to the wall and sharp, looking up and down the girls, short-skirted and no makeup with their uniforms, all their legs gone pale over the winter, the bone color of their tight-tucked blouses.

"Got it," Jan says, "makes the only difference. Got it, and I'm dying standing here talking to you."

And Jan wants a fight. Jan, they called him *kabouter*, elf, when he was little, and he's still little, only now he's little and he's mean. He beats up big guys. He beats them up in pieces, chops them like trees. He keeps that name they called him, keeps it for a dare: you believe it? right here, right now.

If he can wait, he'll beat up my landlord. He'll beat him up for what he does to my dad. My dad's the old man who's sick now and can't feed himself. He goes naked outside sometimes. He says to me, "I don't know who you are," and he holds his own hands by the window.

Jan'll get my landlord for him, the one who's saying, always, "Tell your old man to get out of the window." Who says, "Get your old man off the steps, he's pissed himself again." The one who says now my dad's in hospital, "You're too young to hold a lease."

But Jan isn't going to wait. Tomorrow he can beat up my landlord, maybe tomorrow. He wants a fight now here in the commons, where there's the lunch crowd, and maybe he doesn't want to get away.

"Sit over there," he says. I don't fight with Jan. He doesn't need my help. You get in the way, he says. He tells me to stand where I don't get hurt.

I sit over where he tells me. I nod at the girls over at the next table.

"Watch this," I say. "Watch over there." And they look at me like I'm a snake's head, and why do I talk to them.

"Watch," I say. I tell them, "Watch what he does."

Jan knows the guy; he knows him at the end of the table, with his hair oiled back and a gray school jersey, and he knows what he's been saying.

Jan says to him, "What are you saying about me?" And the guy looks at Jan and doesn't answer him, so he can smile at his buddies and chew with his mouth open.

Jan asks him, "You say I'm a queer? Get up and ask me."

His buddies say, "Get up and pound the little suck." They say, "Beat his ass," and the jersey boy's smiling, standing up.

"Don't turn your back on him," his buddies say.

"Say it to me now," Jan says. And the guy who's smiling, he's always smiling, shrugs.

I tell the girls again, "Watch now. Watch it, what happens."

Jan hacks on him, a loud sound like a rock's cracked. He spits on his face, down his cheek.

"Now you're going to get it and die," Jan says. And then that boy, jersey boy, isn't smiling. He puts his fists up like he's on a chinning bar, but he only gets one punch, and Jan gets three. When Jan brushes jersey boy's punch away, that doesn't count. But Jan gets him a knee in the stones to fold him over. And the right hand's coming up backwards for knuckles in the breastbone, and the left, the fist, coming to the back of the head to knock him down, leave him grunting on the tiles like a hog.

The girls keep watching now. I hear a whistle blowing somewhere, and everybody leaving their food, standing up and saying, "Hey, hey!"

And there's two more jumping up from the table for Jan. It's two of them that can't hold him, and one gets busted in the eye, but the other digs a fork in Jan's back to where it's sticking out, hanging on Jan's shirt. He can't believe he's done it. He has to stop to look, so Jan can get away, me up and running with him into the toilet.

We're in the stall, me and Jan. The fork's still hanging on Jan, but he's pulling up his shirt and undershirt and all. There are little holes like snake bites and little lines of dark blood. The waistband on Jan's jockeys is torn, so it clings above his trousers like a strap on something a girl wears.

"Get up on the loo," Jan is saying to me.

"What for?" I'm saying.

Jan is saying, "There's two of us in here."

I don't care.

"Get up," Jan is saying, and he's shoving me, shoving me like he'll pick me up off the ground.

Jan is screwing his head around. "I can't see it," he says. He puts his hand on the holes where the blood comes off on his fingers. I get toilet paper to clean it off. Jan is saying, "You can't get it on you."

I roll up lots of paper in a wad bigger than my hand. I touch Jan's back and the blood soaks up in patterns like flowers and kiss lips.

"What do I do with it?" I say. I've got it in my hand, all the paper with Jan's blood on it.

Jan says, "Flush it."

"Where does it go?" I say.

Jan says, "The fountains. Let them all get it," but I'm only still waiting.

"I don't know," he says then.

I drop it in the bowl, and now I'm standing on the seat and holding balance to stick paper on Jan's back like on shaving cuts.

When we're coming out of the stall, there's people coming in the door. Jan holds out the fork, and they can see the blood that's dried.

"Get out," he says. He jabs with the fork. When they go, he tips the garbage can to jam the door closed. We hear them outside, asking who is it in there, sending for somebody to come here. We sit back in the stall.

"You better get a tetanus shot," I say to make Jan start to laugh.

"You're so damn dumb," Jan says.

We sit quiet, hearing the thump and rushing down the pipes. The windows are open, from people cutting in here to smoke. Jan leaves the fork on the floor between his feet. The fork teeth are black, like the blood's bad, like it is.

Jan might cry. He might not, he might not want to.

He says, "They'll kick me out of school."

"Then we'll go in to the city," I say. I have to sit on my hands because the floor gets hard to me underneath.

"They kick me out, it doesn't matter," Jan says.

"Maybe you'll get better," I say. "Maybe there's going to be medicine for it."

"There's not," he says.

"Or maybe then you'll just get better."

"I'm going to be a worse mess than your dad," Jan is saying.

"You don't know," I say. And Jan not saying anything back to me, not, so he can laugh for himself to hear laughing. And me then yelling back at him again, "You don't know!"

He mashes my leg against the loo, and I know there'll be a bruise the size of a tennis ball on my knee.

The people outside now are probably police. They're pushing to get in, we can hear them.

"Get up," Jan says. He means get out the window, and we do, and we're outside.

• • •

We ditch at Uncle's.

He tells us to go to school.

"Been," Jan says. Uncle has customers, come to get their clean clothes. He calls the numbers to the boys working at the presses and the racks. Jan is bending a hanger to a boomerang while I'm tuning in the radio. I smell the distilled water and starch that makes me sneeze. We're getting in Uncle's way.

"Go bring me some fish and chips from the shop," he says. He forks over a purple five-rand note. "I get change coming from this."

I say, "We'll take the Honda," so we can get away on the motorbike while he can't stop us.

"See your father," Uncle yells to me.

• • •

Jan rides us toward Brackpan, toward where my father is in hospital. He's a week there now, and I've been Friday and Sunday seeing him. We don't stop because he hasn't known us last time and to go inside there makes my stomach hard. We're only roaring around the parking out front and around the trees to maybe get the sisters mad. But nobody comes because the sound from the bike is too small.

We like a roadhouse in Brackpan, double-thicks from the Casbah. I get lime, and Jan has, always, chocolate. And we eat chips, me with only vinegar and salt, but Jan with pepper, too. We eat them hot at a table outside, blowing the steam out our mouths.

"Does it hurt?" I say to Jan. "They could have maybe put a plaster on at the hospital for it."

Jan shakes his head no, his back doesn't hurt him. The sky is clouds, like always here. The black boys hang out lazy at the window, no cars to wait on. They're chatting up some cleaning girl, circling her like pack dogs.

Jan says, "We got to plan everything we're going to do now."

"We got to spend all our money," I say, "go some places."

Jan says he thinks so.

"Do you want to get a girl?" he says.

I don't know.

• • •

Jan is riding us through the East Rand, past the trees and mine dumps, farther than we go mostly, which is only ever to the Casbah or out another way to Nigel. I hold my thumbs in the belt of his pants. We can't see any police.

Jan turns us to bounce off the road where there's a hole in the fence. He is yelling, "Hang on, hang on!" charging us straight ahead to a mine dump where the motorbike can only climb a little up the side, but already we feel us going straight up before the 50–cc engine heaves and conks out.

"Come on," Jan says. We climb up walking bent over, Jan first, up front, and sometimes our hands digging in the ground and rock. The top is flat and big enough across for rugby or football, but all dead rock like the moon. There's wind up here, and the sun's where you can't see it.

"Look here at this," Jan says. And down the south side in white out of rocks and paint the dump tells the people on the road,

AWAKE!
JESUS
COMETH!

in letters all square.

We sit on the top to watch the cars on the road to Alberton and to throw down rocks, shoot for the middle of the O.

"There's still gold in it," Jan says, he's talking about the rocks, "if we could get it out."

• • •

Back at Uncle's, Uncle says, "Somebody's been here from the school about you."

"Jan's sick," I say. Uncle's got an ear on the phone to somebody who wants clothes brought by the house.

"You shouldn't have been out riding that thing," he says with his lips to us without saying it over the phone.

"It's not that kind of sick," Jan says. Jan and I haven't decided yet anything for tonight. Tomorrow's no more school if we don't want. "They'll kick me out anyway," Jan says.

We're sharing Uncle's fish and chips, Jan's chips over to the side where he puts on the pepper. We lean elbows on the counter to eat off the newspaper Uncle spreads out for grease.

"Did you go see your father?" Uncle says. "How's he doing in there?" Uncle sees him every night. "You should come with me," he tells me. Uncle won't know about whether I say the truth now, but I tell him no.

"Tomorrow night, with me," Uncle says. I don't say to him yes or no.

"What's wrong with you," Uncle says to Jan, "except for what you do with your food?" I don't think Jan is going to tell Uncle. I think he'll make a thing up, and he does, to tell.

He says, "I got a cancer."

Uncle can't eat now. He stubs out a chip like a cigarette. He bows his head to hear Jan say anything more, and I'm waiting, too, to hear it.

"It's only in my eye," Jan says. Then he says, "But you can't see it."

"The trials of this life," Uncle says, and he is sad. "What do the doctors say about it?"

"Nothing, yet," Jan says. He's looking ahead, like he does when we get yelled at. "It's just small."

"I'm sorry, my boy," Uncle says. "I truly am." And he has Jan now, around the shoulders. Uncle could pick him up like a baby, but he

doesn't. He only holds onto Jan, and Jan doesn't hold on back, but he can't be getting away.

"Have you turned to the Lord?" Uncle says. He's let go of Jan so he can see him again. "You've got to put your faith in him."

"I don't know anything about it," Jan says, and Uncle tells him about the tents and then the big Rema church in Randburg. He tells about the miracles. "They are the houses of salvation," he says. "They are the palaces of peace."

When Uncle's gone back to the phone, I tell Jan, "We can go there. Do you want to see?"

• • •

I have money always I can get with a Help-U card. Jan has money in his pocket, and we take a train that goes to Randburg. Jan can't sit still, his back hurting him. He is sad now, not going to talk to me. I gave him a window to look out of, but there's only hills and dead grass and other tracks to see. I sit on the seat so I'm sideways to look up and down the aisle. I think about being little again, and if we had a ball with us I could bounce it and catch it, like we did then all the time. I think that.

I think that because it's better than thinking Jan is going to die. And it's better than me thinking like I'm Jan and going to die, and I have to try all the time not to.

Jan says when was I ever at Rema.

"Uncle goes, and he took me to go with him," I say.

"Does he believe in God?" Jan says.

I tell Jan, "He believes in Jesus." I tell Jan wait till he sees the place, where it's built big enough for sport, and when we get there he sees what I was saying. He sees it big, with chairs like you sit in at the flicks, and I tell him what Uncle said about the whole place is in a blue like sky because that blue is the best for being on TV.

It's middle week and seats are easier getting than on a Sunday. And maybe they're fuller when Ray, the weight lifter who got saved and whose place Rema is, is here himself, but he isn't tonight.

Jan asks, "Who gets healed?"

"The people who go up," I say. "You go up around the stage," and I tell Jan to watch for the front edge of the stage because it moves like a big tongue, out into the crowd and back on wheels underneath it.

"When do they do it?" Jan wants me to tell him.

"It's all at the end," I say.

Jan nods.

"I'll tell you when it is," I say.

All the people start the meeting praising. They sing,

He whose name is Exaltation,
He whose wings supply salvation,
Praise him, children of His promise,
Till we're caught up in the Rapture.

And some of them stand waving their arms, and some of them are standing up to speak.

"Listen," a fat foreign lady says, "listen to that manifestation. Listen to the tongues. Praise God."

It's a black man saying "Our Father" in some Bantu. He says it funny, but it means only, *The Father who is in Heaven, you, the Father who is in Heaven, your name is a great name. It is a great name here on this earth, and where you are in the sky, it is a great name there, too. Give us bread today. And forget the things we owe, and we will forget who has taken things from us and never returned those things back. Keep us out from trouble, and keep bad things away from us. You are most powerful, and power belongs to you. And you are a King. And you are like the sun. And you are forever.*

And he says it over, like it's his passbook number he's giving the police.

But other people speak tongues. Jan wants to know is it a secret language they learn. "I don't know," I say. "It could be that." No one sitting around us speaks. In front of us people clap to the music, and behind us is a couple with a little dog in a basket.

There's a singer special for tonight who's been on a ministry with a Mr. Vanderdos to Zimbabwe. The singer says, "I was a bad man. I was the biggest sinner before the face of the Lord." He was run away from home. And high all the time, too, shooting needles up in his arms like I have seen and never done. "I almost killed a man," he says. "I did it, almost killed him, for his money."

He starts out, and he's singing in English. He gets a mike check, and then he goes into tongues, and then the backup singers, some of them switch to tongues, too, and I think he's mad about that.

All the tongues say the same thing when the man at the microphone translates. They say praise the Lord, and they talk about the mountains and sun breaking out of the east, and they talk about glory waiting for all of them.

After, tonight is sports night. Ray's sports friends who have gotten saved have come to testify.

"I loved my body," one man says. "I made it God." He is speaking to us, a big man, with arms that make a muscle when they bend. "I had my gym for a chapel."

And one a rugby flyhalf with his ear folded inside out. "Some people say you can't hit hard when you're a Christian," he says. "Some people think you can't win. But first you've got to be a champion for the Lord." Jan says the flyhalf played for Eastern Transvaal.

Then the man who's here instead of Ray tonight says come down and be saved.

Jan says, "Now?"

I tell him, "No. This isn't you."

We watch the people go down front and kneel on the blue floor. The choir's singing something about coming into the arms of Jesus. The man who isn't Ray is preaching to us to come get on the road to heaven, and all the church men and women come out from behind the curtain now, and some are gathering up the people praying from the floor to come with them backstage and finish, and some are handing out the yellow baskets for the crowd to fill with money.

Jan says does he have to pay.

"No," I say. "They won't know."

Then it's what we're waiting for, because the man who's here because Ray can't be tonight is saying Brother DuPreez has got an anointing to heal, and I tell Jan to go now.

The crowd is singing again. Nobody going down the aisles to the stage looks too sick. Nobody in a cast, and they can walk. But they might all be like Jan is, who you can't see him being sick, but he's going to die.

There are about ten of them on the stage, where Jan looks like a sloppy dwarf. His pants are too long and his shoes are thick on the bottoms and the sleeves on his jacket come down over his hands, only now he's taking that off because it must be warm up there on the stage where he has to wait.

Brother DuPreez has two assistants to catch the people. When he touches them on the forehead, they all fall, and I look to see him pushing, but I don't. The second woman, she falls down forward, falling on her knees, but everybody else goes backward, like Brother DuPreez is picking them up and giving them a toss.

"Look at it," the fat lady is saying. "Look at the miracle. Hallelujah. Hallelujah, Lord, amen."

Jan is at the end of the line, and I'm going down to have a look closer. I want to know what happens.

"You have to remember everything," I've said to Jan. "You have to say if you see anything." And now I'm down to where I'm in front, and it's going to be Jan they're coming for. The catchers line up back behind him and see it now, Jan's shirt with a big spot of blood, big as a fist, and one of them says something. I see how his lips are moving when he says it, turning Jan to see his back, he must say, "You're hurt."

And Jan tells them he isn't here for that, that little spot is nothing to them. Then Brother DuPreez is over, and Jan telling him what he wants, like it's Santa for Christmas. And then the catcher letting go

from Jan's shoulder like a hot thing and jumping back. And DuPreez standing with nothing he's got to say to Jan, with the other sick ones carried off the stage, and DuPreez now looking down like he's dropped a handful of water.

"You liar! You're liars!" Jan is yelling. He's got fists up to duke out DuPreez right there up front, but two of Ray's lifters are already on him, already with the rubber gloves. And they take an arm each of them to stretch Jan out so he can't move in on them, and everybody standing to watch.

I follow where they haul him out behind the stage, with Jan yelling, "Liars!" and trying to kick. Back here the halls are long and white like in hospital. "Watch it he doesn't bite," one of the lifters is saying. I follow till I see a fire handle to pull.

"Hey," I yell, "hey." And they're turning to look, while I tug the handle down to start the bells on. Jan is away between them, and we are too fast in this world ever for them to be catching us.

• • •

Outside of Randburg we can take a train now either way, back to Springs where home is and Jan not having to ride his bicycle anywhere because he can be staying at my house, or down into Johannesburg, and I say to Jan, the first thing, "Do you want to go to the city?" But he won't say. There's nothing here much. The railway platform and a shop. And then just weeds Jan kicks out in the veld. The train's not coming till half an hour, and I'm hungry from it being so long since the Casbah and the fish and chips.

"You want to eat?" I say. Jan still won't say, but we walk to the cafe, and I buy two Cornish pasties and a Lunch Bar to divide up and pinenut soda, and I know to buy two cans because Jan won't share.

"I hate it here," Jan says.

"Better than the East Rand," I say. Springs is ugly, and Brackpan and Boxburg. Here are no buildings you can see, no mines.

The pie is mostly crust instead of meat, not how I like it. Jan has thrown his out in the weeds.

I haven't asked Jan to know how he got it. It's not his fault. Jan will die, and maybe my father first or after, but him too. I don't like things here either. It's dark and night now, and me shaking all over because it's cold. At the platform, Jan is buying tickets and then pushing the stick of hard blue cardboard into my hand.

Big Where I Come From

How many stories begin with a young man getting off a bus with a bag in his hand to walk toward the old family home while the murky sky begins to rain?

This is not my story.

I hire a limo, waiting at the airport. I read the New York papers, and the driver does not even try to make conversation.

I am big where I come from.

"Don't tell anyone I'll be in town," I have to warn the family. "You'll cause a stir."

I have a secretary to keep track of my days and everything I have to sign. And she loves me, too. She looks like Wonder Woman, wears those heavy glasses and sheer blouses knotted with smart ties at the collar. She's busty and efficient, my right hand.

"Get me tickets out tomorrow," all I have to say. And she looks right through my clothes from behind those specs.

"Sure," she says. "First class?"

Skirts. Always skirts around the office.

I spend millions over the telephone. I buy a ranch I've never seen. T-bills, old bonds and notes.

"Give me an option," I say. "Give me seventy thousand shares preferred."

Give me two more hands, twenty-six hours in a day.

I sell the ranch at a loss for taxes.

"It's got water," I say. "Two lakes and a potable spring."

How do I know? Do I get out to Marlboro Country?

I win big on the margin.

"Brenda," I say. Wonder Woman. In the doorway she looks nine feet tall. "Afternoon flight. Late. We've got court when?"

"Tuesday."

Tuesday. Give me two Tuesdays in a week. Trade them off for a Monday morning and Friday all day long. The amount of business done on a Tuesday would loosen the joints in your knees.

I could sell nineteen thousand units, thirty-five hundred shares, and a Kentucky stable right now.

So I do.

And when it's time to leave.

"Brenda," and she's propped against the door frame, her best foot forward, with her four-hundred-dollar hand-sewn-out-of-Louisiana-thunder-lizard shoe dangling off her toes and my ticket in her hand.

"Mind the store."

• • •

I come into town for my brother the Dope's birthday. My brother is thirty-three and cannot catch on. He has tried used cars, securities, beef, marriage, real estate. My mother threw him out of the house and he came back in disguise and tried to rent the basement. She says to me now, "Can't you take care of things like you did with your father?"

I didn't have him killed.

I said to him, sitting there on the corner of a blown-out cardboard box with an empty bottle and my mother's purse between his feet, "Why don't you go now? I think you've done enough."

He said, "Aw, I don't know."

I said, "Why don't I take you?"

He shuffles down the beaches of Bermuda now, lingering on in the final stages of chronic failure.

I took the check down once in person.

"You," he said. He stood there grizzled and one lens of his glasses cracked like a cube of ice in a glass of cold water. "I know you, hunh?"

Now it's the Dope's sleazy ex-wife who sweetens up and comes to the parties when I'm there.

"I read about you in the papers," she says like she's some whiskey boss's moll, a bright spot on the sun. Like she reads anything other than the TV guide.

And my other brother, Jackie.

"Aw, Pauly, remember the old days?" he says. When he could stand me. Then he goes out to the kitchen to stand at the sink and look out the window while he drinks.

It's my mother I come to see.

I come to fight with my mother because we've always fought, and it's the one thing in life I count on to be sincere.

"Pauly," she says, "you've sold your soul."

"And look what it's got you," I say. The woman has pearls by the bucket in a house with rotted carpet and front steps that melt away like bread in the rain.

"I don't go out," she says.

"Sell all and give to the poor," I tell her.

"Physician," she says, "heal thyself."

"Do unto others," I remind her, "and hang onto your receipts."

• • •

There was a time before success when I was spiteful.

I was going to buy this town, every crumbling brick, foreclose, and let it molder and decay. All this I swore in anger. I'd cut wages to invite the aimless and the seedy. I'd close warehouses and packing plants and open bars and all-night video arcades. I was younger, wounded by wrongs and rejection. I'd sell it to the Japanese.

Good sense in the form of an enormously fat man in flowered yellow and orange bathing trunks brought me around to hearing reason.

"Why bother," he said while he watched a half-nude coed hold her nose and come flailing off the high dive, "with what time will do for you?"

"Ah," I said, "good things come to those who wait."

"Not at all," my mentor said, and he heaved himself out of his chair to take the wet girl a towel.

"What then?" I said. A penny saved? A fool and his money? Waste not, want not? The Siamese laws of progress and entropy? I studied it out while he got the girl a drink, and I concluded that he meant just what he said.

• • •

When I'm in town, I don't stay at the house.

"I didn't expect you would," my mother says. "I didn't even make up a room."

I sleep five hours a night. I tell my mother this and say that I wouldn't want to keep her up.

"Keep up who? We could sit here and watch Carson," she says.

It's Leno now. Same difference.

Even at the hotel, I have bad dreams. The Dope gets the number to my Gold Card; his ex-wife gets in bed with me. My other brother strokes a hammer in the basement, waiting for my breathing to turn heavy and regular.

What they would be at home under the frilly jalousies and the fetid envy I don't imagine. If I die in bed, it won't be there.

Even so, at 2 A.M. I am up on one elbow in bed and calling Marilyn on the phone. She is a mother now and a light sleeper. She picks up after three rings and says hello in a voice accustomed to answering the call to service.

"Would you come here now?" I say. I only phone when I'm in town.

"No, Pauly," she says. "How are you?"

"Is Harlow there?" I say.

"He's in Milwaukee till next Wednesday," she tells me.

"I don't want you to send things back if you don't want them," I say.

"I don't want anything, Pauly."

In the long pause that follows my not answering, I note that any hotel room under one hundred dollars a night smells the same. They all have the polypropolene cups wrapped in sanitary plastic in the bathroom. They all have traffic outside the windows.

"Are you still living in New York?" Marilyn says. She's settled back into her bed now, I know, in a sensible nightie with the phone tucked under her chin and the covers pulled up. I know this because she's told me. Ten years ago she had a bedside phone in her room she could throttle in half a ring when I came off swing shift excited with schemes and screwed up tight on ambition and avaristic energy. I would rattle on while I marked up the East Coast papers and rallied numbers into marching order in my head, and she would pop off minor questions now and then or hum a little to reaffirm her interest.

"New York is the land of kings and queens," I say to her tonight. "When are you coming?"

"I'm not," she says. "How are you doing these days?"

"Bigger than I've ever been. Out of bounds."

"'Living large,' isn't that what the kids are saying nowadays?" she says.

"I'm still a size forty." It's worth a little laugh.

"That's something," she says. "I wish I was." This is rhetoric. This is not flirtation.

"I've got a new number," I tell her. "You can reach me by fax."

"I don't need it," she says.

I give her the number and I tell her good night.

Marilyn is amazing just where she is. She might be the most expensive thing in the world, and I want not to have her. It's a good thing to practice denial.

• • •

My mother prestidigitates a homemade birthday cake for the Dope and reminds me that she doesn't play favorites.

"All you have to do is come get it," she says.

(Brenda, make a note: 19 July—Birthday. Stop off in Nowhereville, pick up cake. Arrive in Chicago 9:17.)

"Ma," I say, "we celebrate birthdays in New York. I have friends there."

"You think I don't know that?" she says.

"Last year the staff threw me a surprise dinner at some swanky bistro uptown. I don't think I knew all the people. Lowballers pitch up at these things to scout for favors."

"All I said," she says, "is if you want a cake you can come home. Two layers, chocolate with chocolate frosting."

"I don't eat so much cake these days," I say.

"I thought you'd have it and eat it too," my other brother, Jackie, says. He slaps my shoulders and sniffs back at his hay fever. "Aw, you're living the good life, Pauly," then he's out to the front steps with his glass.

The Dope's high school buddies duck out of work about three and come over to barbecue in the late Friday afternoon. They've never made it out of town. They've hung around to inherit their fathers' businesses, watch their wives develop stretch marks, and go to Chicago for convention or lodge maybe once every two years. They look to me to corroborate all the fantastic stories of the wily, madcap world outside their own front yards as told by one of their number who works as a salesman on the road.

"I can't say," I tell them. "I've never been to Sioux Falls." They love this, and all offense is lost. Irony to this crowd is a chance coincidence in sports or cars, a recent football score that corresponds with a high school game on the same date in 1977.

"Weird, hunh?" somebody named Danny says.

"Hey, Pauly," somebody asks, "how long it take you to make your first million?"

"Yeah?" he says when I tell him. "How long would it take for you to make mine?"

I give him a surefire scheme for one point two in twenty-four months if he has the venture capital.

"Yeah, Pauly," he says, "you live the life." They all nod, the sons of upholsterers and appliance salesmen, one fireman, and a small-town bureaucrat and part-time restaurateur. They nod and fold their hands around longnecked bottles of beer like so many wise Jews at Iowa's own wailing wall made up of the peeling white fence that keeps the yard from being outside itself.

"You got the breaks, Pauly, can't argue that. You got Lady Luck for your own lovin' mistress."

"You're the man," Danny says, pointing at me with a half-empty longneck and awed by his own thought, "who could bring major league sports to Iowa."

• • •

Back inside, the Dope's ex has ambled by the house in bad faith and under false pretenses. They are making nice for Mother's sake, but she blows me kisses from the hallway.

The Dope would take her back, and this to her is something twice as good as credit if he has anything she needs, which is mostly sport or a coffee cup to spit in.

I call Brenda at the office twice for a heavy hit of merchandising, some contact with the monied world, but I can't get through. I watch the Dow like these sons of farmers' daughters watch the weather. When I stop moving, two yokels shake me down for off-handed stock tips, and a neighbor steers me to the breakfast nook and confesses bankruptcy. He's got his head bowed, and if he had a hat he'd have it in his hands. The wallpaper around us is crazy with sunflowers.

"Mama," I say when the car arrives, and she locks on me in a squint like she's a pitcher waiting on the signal from the plate. I hold both hands out. "No weapons," I say. I hug her and she tells me that I have no heart.

"You did all right by me," I tell her.

"It's easier for a camel to pass through the needle's eye," she reminds me.

I've heard it all. I kiss her cheek. "St. Peter holds my table."

• • •

I'm at the airport looking with the flight attendant at my ticket—my one-way ticket—when I hear the world start to rip like a zipper in a piece of tin.

Brenda answers this time. "Hey, baby," she says. Wicked laughter. "What do friends say, 'What's yours is mine'?"

There is blood from the nether regions pumping up my body and a fever starting above my upper lip. Lust is cheap compared to this, pure pornography. For a moment I know no fear.

"You're so beautiful," I tell her.

"You're bankrupt," she says.

Wonder Woman. Nine feet tall.

"If you ever need a favor . . ." She laughs, and there's another voice in the background—anyone I know?—and the sound of ice in glasses. Here, marooned in the forsaken wastes of middle America, a man behind me with a name tag that says "Wallace" is serving up my shredded company credit card and asking please if I could follow him a moment.

I allow myself a minute to consider options.

"Certainly," I say.

• • •

The word is out with the morning papers and twice around town by noon. I've been on the phone from Brussels to Hong Kong, woken up old neighbors and accomplices and a distant cousin of the fraternal order who loan-sharks part-time in Atlantic City, all to find I don't have a friend or favor left in this whole world.

By two o'clock I have given up on scrambling, and three thousand milligrams of aspirin are mixing with the rolls of antacids and breath mints in my stomach to form a hardpan layer blocking my intestines that will be soluble only in alcohol. My situation is this: an unwise overextension of some powers of attorney for the sake of convenience and throwing up small clouds of smoke for the bloodhounds of the Department of Internal Revenue has left me with two shirts and my old room back.

While I ponder on my fall, my brother Jackie sits down and pushes coffee in a white ceramic mug across the table to me. He looks both sober and sincere, with his hair wet down and a clean shirt.

"So what happened?" he says. I check his face for sarcasm, but all I see is a close shave.

Later, the Dope's ex calls him to take in a matinee, and my mother takes a pill and a nap, the kind where she lays on her back with her toes pointed up, snoring a Sousa march and swearing that she's never closed her eyes. I tell her Huck Castleman has already been around to offer me a job hawking used cars. He says he doesn't want to see me going to the competition, which there isn't any of in town, unless you want to drive a harvester or a kid's bike to church and down the freeway. He's told me to sleep on it over the weekend; he's not going anywhere.

I bring up the subject of my father's little pistol.

Ma says to me, sitting at the foot of her bed and not yet tipped over, "This will be the best thing ever to happen to you."

"How's that?" I want to know. I've had a shower and I've got on a pair of Jackie's stretch-fit slacks and my old 4–H windbreaker open over a T-shirt.

Ma lies back and scoots herself up the bedspread with her elbows.

"You just wait. There's things in this world you can't buy with money. Families band together when the wolves are at the door."

"That's because they can't get out," I say.

"Just you wait."

• • •

Saturday night I spend alone under a blanket in a web lawn chair in the backyard. My brothers and I grew up out here, sleeping under homemade tents and running wild with the neighbor kids. The world turns more slowly this far west, and the nights are long and quiet. I don't recall ever seeing a star in New York City, though you could buy a view there, too, if you wanted one. I don't recall that I ever looked or that I ever cared.

All this I've left behind.

Such is the bed I made.

• • •

Sunday afternoon I am sitting on the front porch explaining leverage to a neighborhood hound when Marilyn comes by. In a yellow sundress with a straw bonnet in her hands, she is the picture of all that's good in Iowa and the heroine of a hundred musicals. Starting with her shoulders, I see in her my favorites of geography and every place I've planned to go. She is healthiness and vigor, the rose that's found in cheeks. She is apples, she is peaches, she is lemon.

In another time she is queen, and another she is virgin. And then a maiden moonlit on a balcony, and then a high school girl shooting basketball in gym class. And now a woman and a wife at twenty-nine with her brown feet bare and her sandals in her hat.

She's heard.

She's not offering adultery, but she's inviting me for dinner.

"Why don't you come, Paul?" she says.

In her kindness, which I will take for pity, I find everything I need.

"Thanks," I say. "No."

I can feel bottom now beneath my feet and the air charged with the static of imminent magnificence and currency. I am ready once again to eat the weak and test the alchemy of turning baser metals into gold. I know the sleight of hand of futures shares, the finer points of interest rates, and the eight-fold path of real estate. I know buy low, sell high, corner, hedge, shelter, trade, boom, bust, profit, loss, location, location, and location. There are no great men, only great deals.

And when I find two nickels to rub together, stand back from the heat of molten metal and the flash of a rising star.

I can't wait till Monday morning.

August—Staying Cool

This summer in record heat, five days running over a hundred degrees, I'm staying cool—no smack, no ice, no Robitussin remedy—jacked up on rock and roll pumped out on monster floor-to-ceiling speakers from my brother's apartment. He explains how they produce a wall of sound that turns the front end of the living room into a stage when you sit at the point he's triangulated out with string and a nail across the ceiling. He says you sit here and lay your head back; and I swear he's right, that sometimes when the blues get deep enough the room sets you on edge and sinks you into a deep and sweet surrender I haven't felt for two months now since I came off heroin the second time cold turkey.

Evelyn Ray saw me through that, with my brother Mike. The first time, when I went out of state for a clean break and methadone treatments. The second time, the home remedy in the back room, strapped to the bed with leather belts. Mike telling all the neighbors I was OK. Evelyn wiping down my body with a wet towel, cleaning up the mess I made of the sheets. Kissing me and petting my hair when I was calm or played out. Mike standing over me then, big and black, like I was his full-blood brother, saying to me, "You beat it back. You win this."

There's a word for what Evelyn did, leaving me now.

"I just don't see it," I tell Mike.

"She just leave," he says, "or did you two fight?"

If I point to the day itself, one day out of a hundred, she just left, gone out early, probably after groceries. Or, for precision's sake, she never came by at all.

Mike's worried about me now with the heat. That's why he's carted in the stereo and the big projection TV and half a million CDs and videocassettes. He's thinking about the Santa Anas that blew back when he was down in Southern California, the hot winds that stoke up everything to boiling. Mike says when the Santa Anas come, it all starts to give. People jump off bridges and kill each other. They go crazy with crime, crazy in the heat when the wind blows, no way out in the barrio. No way, Mike says.

"You got to stay cool," he tells me. "You got to ride this out. Be a big man."

He's told me he won't see me again on dope. He'll kill me first and then move away.

Mike should be a woman.

I've got a shrine assembled on the TV. Mike doesn't like it, but he lets it go. I've got a used-up needle, with a burnt-out spoon and an old piece of surgical tubing.

"That ain't no way," Mike's said.

"It's my way," I tell him. "I'm bigger."

I've surrounded the paraphernalia with pictures of friends who have died, infected early on, before the word got out about swapping needles. One of them might have been gay, too, but they were all big users. I've got Polaroids and quick prints, in all stages of life and decline. One buddy was saving up for Europe, where there were some new treatments, but he caught strep first, and that did him. Evelyn found me afterward in my bathtub, where I'd dug his initials into the enamel with my car keys.

The things I've thought of doing, sending her in the mail.

I talk them out with Mike. I tell him I've watched *The Godfather* all afternoon.

Mike puffs up his cheeks and blows out air like he's practicing trumpet. His girlfriend, Denise, is with him tonight, talking about getting together something to eat. I made it out to the store today, and I tell her there's ham for sandwiches, lettuce and some little tomatoes and stuff for a salad.

"Salad?" she says.

"Yeah," I say. "My mother used to make a salad for dinner."

"You want to eat salad," Denise says. She says it slow, like it's half question, half temptation.

"Yeah," I say. She's sitting on the corner of the couch with her legs crossed at the knee. Denise is all lines; the long lines of her feet and legs slip into the triangle of her miniskirt. Her arms are lines off her square shoulders. She keeps her back straight, and she is the proudest, sexiest, blackest woman I have ever known.

"Too hot to be cooking no salad," she says. She's got me staring now. She's got her hair beaded and hanging like a veil. It's shiny, glossy black as polished shoes.

"What's this, Mike?" I'm saying.

"Crazy lady," Mike says. "Crazy with the heat."

"What's crazy?" Denise says.

"Whole damn world," I say.

"Braves this year," Mike says, like he keeps track of baseball. He's got the TV guide to see what's on.

"Got no time to discuss it," Denise says. "Got to go make the big man's salad."

"What?" I say and watch her leave.

"How she is," Mike says. He's pulled his cowboy boots off, and I pick them up and set them outside the front door.

"People out there steal," he says.

"People in here got to breathe," I tell him.

Mike's looking at the half circle of pictures on the TV. There's one of Evelyn today, propped up against an aerosol can of hair spray. In

it she's trying not to smile. She has dimples and green eyes, her face pink with sunburn. Mike reaches over to pick it up, looking for clues.

"You like that granola girl look," he says. He flips the picture back into the middle of the shrine. "You got to be cool," he says. "Life coming at you in waves, you got to just bend back and . . ."

"What?" I say.

"Float," Mike says.

"What do you know about it?" I say.

"You don't begin knowing what I know," Mike says. "You get any calls on anything?"

"Just someone while I was in the bathroom," I say. "Always happens."

"That was me," Mike says. The fan's turned up high, humming like an airplane.

"Appreciate it," I say. "It's what gets me through the day."

"Only saying me and Denise are seeing some movie tonight," Mike says, "someplace with some A.C. You want to go?"

"No," I say.

"You want work?" he says.

"Someday."

"You going to burn that girl's picture?" he says.

"Thought I might."

"Boy," Mike says.

"Boy."

Mike crosses his arms above his head, and I can see the muscles under his shirt, the slick stains under his arms. We shared a father who was neither black as Mike nor white as me, though we never shared a house. And Mike removed my enemies when I was young, the ones he chose to, the ones who thought they were really bad.

"Wait till your nigger brother ain't around," they used to say.

"Yeah, wait," Mike would say when I'd tell him. He had a junior weight set with the bar bent from too much poundage and a juvenile record. "They'll be waiting a long time."

It's been just like that.

"So she walked out on you," he says now. "So what?"

• • •

Evelyn sang on the weekends, country torch and twang, danced with gentleman cowboys who called her little sister. It was a funny thing for a Mormon girl to do in Utah, working bars and clubs. But she hadn't been raised a Mormon, hadn't grown up in Utah, had time enough to decide on her own set of virtues in Savannah. She'd eat out of my fridge, use the laundry in the basement, but she wouldn't go to bed with me.

"I'm not going to marry you," she said a hundred times.

"I never asked," I said.

"Just so you know."

"Just so you know I never asked," I said. I had to kick through the country tapes she left littered all over the floor, George Strait, Randy Travis, Garth Brooks. "Where's Johnny Cash?" I said. "My dad used to listen to him."

"Somewhere in Missouri," Evy said.

"Why don't you pick this up?" I said.

"Why don't you get rich?"

On and on.

She stayed at my place while I went to start the methadone treatments. She sent me get-well cards with elephants that had thermometers sticking out of their trunks and crazy cats with zigzag stripes looking like they'd just crawled out of some psychedelic trash can. One with a big set of lips that said, "Put this where it hurts."

"I'll water the plants," she said. She was sitting on my bed, folding things for me to put in a suitcase.

"There aren't any."

"I'd better get some," she said. She knew how scared I was this wasn't going to work. She knew where the money was coming from—from my mother through her second marriage to a contractor up in Ogden, which had come after my dad announced another half brother to Mike and myself. She was funneling it through Mike, and I was too sick and too worn out and limp to fight anymore, only wanting off, out from under.

I was in sweats and shakes later that night, and Evelyn stayed.

"Sit down here," she said. She put me on the floor between her knees and rubbed my shoulders and my neck.

"Why don't you go to work?" I said.

"Hush," she said.

"I'm not your baby," I said. I'd been throwing up all day, and the heat was up high in the apartment. Evelyn had made some clear soup out of chicken wings and angel-hair noodles. I had my shirt unbuttoned, no pants on.

"Yes, you are," she said. "You're my baby." She scooped the hair back off my forehead with her hand to cool my face. Then she curled over me, held my head against her chest, and rocked me.

"Mama's boy," she said, "little angel," and sang cowboy songs quiet in my ear.

"I saw the devil in my closet once," I said. "Mike was there. We all played Crazy-Eights."

"Shh," Evelyn said. I had my ear against her breast. I could hear her heart pound.

"I'll say it," I said.

"What?" Evelyn said.

"Anything. I'm sorry," I said. "I'm very sorry about all this."

"Shh," Evelyn said.

• • •

If I burn her picture, I've got another one. I bought one of those disposable cardboard Kodaks for a weekend trip up to Hoback Junction and took the whole roll of her: by the pine tree, with the squirrel, Evelyn pointing at the mountain, Evy sleeping in the truck. I've got one of her in a bathing suit that's nothing special.

I called her fat once.

"Where?" she said. She started looking for it, pinching and screwing her head around to see behind her right there on my kitchen floor, and what was I going to say.

• • •

Mike comes by with a deli sack of fried chicken and a six-pack of Sharp's beer substitute that tastes as good as dishwater to me. No booze either. I'm dry. Denise is on night shift at Smith's Food and Drug, where she's assistant manager with a ring of keys and a uniform with a little red vest.

"Sit," I say.

The Republicans are on TV. They claim the Democratic challenger's experience in foreign affairs amounts to breakfast at an International House of Pancakes. Mike doesn't vote.

"Denise wants me and her to be looking for some place, I guess," he says. "She's getting ideas."

"It ain't ideas you want," I say.

"What do you know about it?" he says. He's got his high-tops on, and his shorts with rips up the sides for his thigh muscles, ready for a little roundball.

This is exercise for the week. Mike spots me ten points and still beats me to twenty-one. There's enough heat left in the asphalt to turn the soles of our shoes tacky. I tear my shirt down the middle yanking it off halfway through a game. At midnight it will be almost 90 degrees. I hop a fence to stand in a sprinkler in between games, to keep from tearing off my skin. Last week I cut off my hair the minute we walked back into the house. I did it with a kitchen knife, stopped Mike dead trying to think in time.

We let two kids in on a second game. I get the tall one with a grinning black widow on his T-shirt. I feed him behind my back, looking his buddy off the other way, and he glides around Mike and puts up a one-handed stuff over his shoulder.

"Bet me," I yell at Mike.

"I bet you lose," he says.

"Bet this," I say, and I launch a rainbow from somewhere in half-court land and look it all the way home into the bottom of the net.

Mike and his partner burn us on an in-bounds play that sends Mike up the middle to turn around and screen for the kid who is a pure

shooter. We can't beat them at muscle ball either, and when my outside shot stops falling we're done for unless the spider can get a step on Mike, then it's lift off and flying to the hole with the sun in his hands. We hold on till sixteen.

"You're too big, man," the spider says to Mike. "You ought to be playing some football."

"You just got to get good enough," Mike says.

"Huh," the spider says, "good enough."

"Get gooder," Mike says.

"Huh," the spider says.

After, Mike and I sit on the grass waiting for the sun to finish going down.

"She's out of town, man," Mike says, telling me what to be doing about Evy. "She's all gone."

"I'll get around to looking someday," I say.

"What's it matter?" he says.

"Doesn't," I say. "Doesn't have to matter."

We sit breathing hard, and the air tastes like it comes out of a vacuum cleaner and doesn't do us any good.

"Hot," I say. My back itches. Mike's chest is covered in short hair that looks like some tight little bush. I'm on my back, and then I'm on my knees.

"Just sit still," Mike says.

• • •

Where did I meet Evelyn Ray?

It's a topic for this afternoon. I couldn't sleep last night. Nobody could. Sirens. I got up and put my pants on, and I was thinking I'd chase the fire engines. But I just opened the front door and sat on the couch and let the fan run.

Evelyn Ray left Savannah, Georgia, when she was nineteen and came out to Utah because she joined the Mormon church.

She wrote that down on the top of a yellow piece of paper and said it was the beginning of her history.

"What were you before?" I said.

"A waitress," she said.

"Where do I come in?"

"Here." She ripped out a piece of paper and told me to write about myself, the first thing I could remember.

"Today," I said.

"I'm busy," she told me. She had herself curled around the paper so I couldn't read it, scratching with a number two pencil she smeared because she wrote left-handed and never learned to turn her paper sideways.

I thought Mike was the earliest thing. But then I remembered a rocking horse, the old kind with a square metal frame and big springs that always got stretched out and busted from riding too hard. I remembered naming it Poker and Bullet, Silver, a hundred different things. I remembered it had a saddle and wooden handles coming out of the head behind the ears and a belt I hung around its neck for reins. That and Mike were all my father ever gave me.

I let her read it, and Evelyn thought it was important.

"Why?" I said.

"Because it means something to you. Because it's part of what you are."

"I set it on fire," I told her. "I burned it and my dad beat me so I couldn't go to school for a week."

"You're a spoiler," she said, flipping the paper at me. "You're afraid to enjoy anything."

"I didn't spoil the world," I said.

"You spoil it every day it's bad."

"I've heard it all before," I said.

"Why weren't you happy when you were little?"

"Nothing to be happy about," I said. "Go to school, someone's got to beat on you because of something you said once. Home, you're always making too much noise, or you talk back, or you didn't take out the garbage just like you got told, so someone's got to beat on you for

that. Some people beat on you just because they feel like it. Best reason of all, 'Because I feel like it.' That's why," I said.

"You tell a sad story," Evelyn said.

She didn't grow up in peaches-and-cream Georgia. When she was in the mood she would tell me stories in this bland, ordinary voice about a southern, white-trash girlhood.

"But I can make up my own mind," she said.

• • •

I might have known a drummer in a band she was in.

• • •

I'll say this: I still can't find anything in my kitchen. I've been tearing through the cupboards this afternoon. I've turned the drawers upside down onto the floor, and I'm wading in trash, coupons, rubber bands, busted plastic dinner forks up to my ankles. I know what I am looking for. I've made so sure, double, triple certain I can't find it. I settle for the refrigerator with the door open, sucking on ice. The fan's broken and the apartment must be a hundred and fifteen degrees. I've dumped the fridge, and I'm sitting in it, on the vegetable crisper. My pants are damp and my shirt's gone. Mike will let me get away with anything. He'll come in and see the place, and he'll clean the kitchen while I watch sitcoms on the tube dealing with what are real-life situations somewhere in America.

A friend called this morning.

I said to him, No. No. No. Good-bye.

• • •

Evelyn bought a green pickup for three hundred dollars. It used to belong to the water conservancy district. It had a sprinkler with a little plume of water coming out of it painted on the side. She drove it to gigs, factory outlets, drove it to buy groceries. She couldn't cook, ate everything out of a can or a bottle.

I tried to show her one thing, pancakes, from a mix that came in a blue bag with gold letters. "This is basic chemistry," I told her, "equal parts flour and water."

"I can do that part," she said. But she couldn't, never quite right.

"And you turn the griddle down low," I said. "And you wait. Then you pour on the batter and wait for the bubbles on the top." I showed her how to peek under the edge to check to see it was browned just right underneath.

She cooked them sticky and raw as bread dough.

"Make them for me," she said.

"You got to fend for yourself," I said.

"I can't," she said.

"When are you going to learn to fish?" I said. "When are you going to quit feeding off my catch?"

"Make me pancakes," Evelyn would say. "Just three little ones. And make some for you. You ought to eat more."

I was skinny, back to using again, fooling the world.

• • •

In May, when Evy's father died, the family called her, but nobody had the money to send, nobody cared if she came.

"I'll get it," I told her, the way I must have told her a thousand other things.

"When you die," she said one night, sitting by the window opened up to let the smell of the rain come in, "your spirit, what's really you, leaves your body, and that's all." I had my face against her neck and shoulder. I thought I was giving her some comfort.

Her hair hung down to her waist, and she hadn't put it up in days. She'd sat around my place in a sack dress and her bedroom slippers. I must have been tired. I remember thinking, I should be listening to this.

"When you die," she said, "you go home to God. What are you going to say to God?"

"'Old man,'" I said, and I didn't know just where to go from there.

"For that moment, when you come back, no matter what you've done," she said, "you know he loves you."

"You believe that?" I said.

"Mm hmm."

"It sounds good," I said. I pushed the screen out, so Evy could get at the water, and watched it crash in the street.

"It's going to rain all night," I said. I don't remember if it did.

I couldn't look in her eyes those days.

• • •

The second time I came just that close to flying off to some low-budget Betty Ford spin-off. Mike was ready to kill me, and my mother was phoning clinics. I'd stayed off six weeks.

"No more," Mike said while he washed my stuff down the sink. Evelyn was standing in the front room crying with her fist in her mouth.

"No more," I said. "Never, no more," so high I didn't know who I was.

"I'll kill you," Mike said.

"Don't say that," Evelyn said. She was screaming. "Don't say that, ever."

"You afraid?" Mike said to me.

"Of you?" I said. I had my hands behind me, on the kitchen table. I was limp and grinning at Mike standing at the sink.

"Stop it," Evelyn was screaming.

"You better get afraid," Mike said. "You better get scared." I heard Evy crying harder, and then I swore I heard the rib crack when Mike hit me.

"You're going to learn something," he said.

They kept me in the dark five days. Mike phoned in sick or left me with Evelyn and came in the evenings to lean against the wall at the foot of my bed like some big black angel.

I called Evy bad names. I made her make promises. She said anything.

• • •

Mike's getting married. Denise has got a ring with diamonds and gold swirling around like a galaxy.

I tell them to wait for Christmas. If they do it now, the flowers will wilt and the cake will melt. Everything will be sweaty and sticky. "How about Halloween? Or Turkey Day?" I offer as advice.

"Do you want to get yourself invited?" Denise says. She's in her manager's outfit, and the way she wears it, it looks like a costume for a strip act. It looks tailored, nipped and tucked in all the right places. Vanity.

"I'm the best man," I say. Mike's brought by mineral water that's clear and flavored with lime juice. I make them a toast.

"To you," I say.

"You can't come if you don't behave," Denise warns me.

I put my feet up on the TV. I burp, but then I cover my mouth and say, "Excuse me."

"Ask your mama if she wants to come," Mike says from the couch. "Dad says anything about it, how come he's not invited, I'll tell him I thought he went to hell a long time ago."

"I saw him there, once or twice," I say. I hold up Evelyn's picture in two hands. "Too bad you're gone," I say to it, "we could have had a hoedown." Denise is folding out a compact at the bathroom sink, touching up her eyeliner. I have never seen her sweat.

"How do they keep it cool in the store with no doors?" I say. They have an air curtain where Denise works, and I have always wondered about this.

"You're so wise," Denise says. "You're like an old man." Denise is too cryptic for me. She speaks in riddles. Mike's welcome to her.

"Do it in a church," I say.

"Oh, yeah," Mike says.

"You'll be my sister," I tell Denise.

"Won't that be something to write home and tell the folks," she says. She slips the makeup into her purse and leaves the bathroom light on. "See you later," she says to Mike on her way out, heavy on the "you."

• • •

I'll get a job in the fall, after the college kids are back in school, after the sun starts going down at night. I'm writing a list of things to do,

and the pencil is slick and burns a red slash on my finger. I use an old notepad of Evy's that says "In Case You Forgot . . ." at the top. After "get a job" I put down "bank account." Mike calls about 11:30.

"I'm just up," he says.

"Me, too."

"Me and Denise going to get some place where you don't hear all the traffic."

"I like it," I say. I can hear it now. I'm stretched out on the couch in just my jeans, looking out the front door into the street.

"Getting married, man," Mike says.

"Getting married," I say. "Getting old." I can hear the swamp cooler at Mike's place. I can hear a radio.

"You weren't ever going to marry that girl," Mike says.

"No," I say.

"Then forget about it."

"Best thing," I agree.

Mike breathes into the phone, a sound like static. Denise is working graveyard. Mike will be sitting in his living room in his shorts till one or two, all the lights off, waiting to call her on break.

I stretch the phone cord into the bathroom and turn on the shower with my foot for Mike to hear in the background. Then I pull the bathroom door shut.

"Who you got over there?" Mike says.

"Nobody in particular."

"Good boy," Mike says.

"I won't ruin your wedding," I tell him.

"No chance. You're best man."

I leave the phone on my stomach when he hangs up, let the shower run.

Across the street there is a neon sign over a bakery that says "Star." The gang kids hang there on the weekends in front of the big window, flashing handsign, talking trash. I know them, and they don't bother me.

I haven't really changed much.

I turn to Evelyn's picture on top of the TV that's casting a blue light in the room and moving pictures without sound up on the wall. I tell it, "I haven't really changed much."

Then I lay back and wait for glass across the street to shatter, some crack in the weather.

Home and Family

Now, with my wife gone, and my children with her, and my job, I start my day with eggs I buy two dozen at a time on gray cardboard sheets. I germinate bean plants and tomatoes in the little bra-like cups, and I stack the cracked half-shells like bowls in the corner of my kitchen. I toast bread or graham crackers or English muffins in a wire basket over the gas flame of the camp stove until they turn just the color of catalpa husks, and I read a verse out of the New Word Bible. I say a prayer over my plate: God, thank you for this. This day is mine.

I check the sky while hauling out my two-quart Teflon sauce pan that serves as chamber pot, adding a deposit to the growing pile of compost in the southwest corner of my lot, farthest away from the well. I'm interested in seeing just what I might leave behind, what mark a man might make on the world. I have read that a row of garbage trucks loaded with one year of this country's trash would line up halfway to the moon. I'd like to see that. Or the wall, twelve feet high, we could assemble out of used Styrofoam that would come twisting out of Los Angeles across the Nevada high desert, over the Continental Divide into the corn land of the central plains, through the industry of Ohio and Pennsylvania, onto the avenues and docks of New York. That, too.

We throw away enough paper and cardboard in this country to keep five million people warm for two hundred years, but it would look like Romania, where you can't see now for smoke. There they've accomplished something. They've put their hand to the vein and pinched it off, but instead of the pressure pumping up to burst out in a mighty ejaculation and a cleansing rush of wind, the backside gave out and dribbled everything into the rivers and the Black Sea.

These are the only two man-made things you can see from outer space: the Great Wall of China and disaster.

I try to be unobtrusive.

"Rock," my wife said when she moved out the last of her things, "what's changed?"

"This," I said. She had my youngest daughter hefted in her arms and furniture piled in the street. "Everything."

"You," she said.

The telephone rings without fail by seven-thirty. Connie and Maxine are up already for hours, scratching together work for the employees of the Lend-A-Hand Temporary Agency's light industrial division. I deny any aptitude, take no tests besides the timed one that requires me to screw on wing nuts as fast as I can with both hands. After being caught in the corporate purge of middle management I don't sell, don't wear a tie, don't serve as junior vice president of anything. Connie and Maxine call me to clean a warehouse, pack the belongings of a young officer's family into plywood overseas shipping crates, truck pallets. I am, by virtue of small gifts and little attentions which come at no great cost to me when I am by the office—Connie likes a word about her outfit, Maxine a little pat and harmless flirting—always first on their list. I never refuse the work or the venue. I am reliable.

"Be there by eight?" Connie will always ask. No sense in nine o'clock jobs for me, up already with the morning paper and the milk trucks.

"Sharp," I say. "Thanks, lover," if it's Maxine on the line.

"Promises," she says, "always promises."

"I know somebody for you," she's always saying, too. "Why don't you give it a try?"

This morning it is Connie, checking to make sure I'm still on at Ace Chemical.

"I'm a hit," I say, "they love me."

"Call me when they're finished with you," Connie says.

• • •

I am easy to work with, a good man to have working for you. I am a big man, six-and-a-half feet tall and weigh over two hundred and thirty pounds, but I am congenial and a quick hand and study. In the break room over spudnuts, while we wait for the day's roster at Ace Chemical, I keep the ice broken and stirred with mutant jokes. I've stitched a sixth finger onto the side of my Wells Lamont jackass glove.

"I didn't wash my hands," I say. Someone warns one of the younger kids on the crew, newly married and who comes to work tired and propped up on a 32–ounce mug of Coca-Cola and powdered minidonuts, that caffeine overdose will inhibit his staying power.

"Huh," he says.

The newlywed started as a temp, too, from another agency. Not everybody's looking to get on full time, though. Mostly I work in gangs of men who stoop and stand for five dollars an hour and take no particular pride in their work. I worked with a man moving his family across the country in a beat-up station wagon that breaks down or runs out of gas in front of police stations where they will give him enough money to get him to the next town, off their hands and out of their jurisdiction.

"There's good folks on the road," he said, "people who'll see you a gallon of gas or a sandwich."

"Junky men," my wife would have called them, did call them. "Not like you," she said when I started working with Lend-A-Hand. "Not like you at all."

• • •

The newlywed's name is Ethan. His wife's name is Cheryl, and I ask how she's doing while I'm riding on a pallet of empty brown sacks that

Ethan drives to the middle of the lot on a forklift. The sacks are heavy and lined with plastic, with the stitched top like pour-it-yourself concrete comes in.

"There's something I don't understand," Ethan says.

"What's that?" I say.

"She keeps leaving," he says. I can see his eyes over the paper surgical mask he wears while we off-load potash from a trailer that came in yesterday five minutes before closing. They are the murky green of pond water in a bottle. I have a mask, too, and we look like doctors over the table.

We talk in between pallets and the noise of the auger. Cheryl leaves, without fail, after the nine o'clock rerun episode of *Knot's Landing.* Three weeks now in a row, and counting.

"She's back by noon the next day," Ethan says, his weak mustache prickled with salt. "She'll call me at lunch. I can't make anything of it." I can't either, though there's nothing in those shows that would lend to a good marriage, nothing to make a man or woman feel adequate. There's all that money and the horses. There are the bodies of women who don't exist in this world.

"Other than that," I say, "how are things?"

Other than that, Ethan talks about hating Rory Lundquist, two weeks his senior on the job. "He just keeps asking for it," Ethan says when Rory drives by on a bigger forklift. "He keeps on riding me."

I could tell Ethan that if he chooses to look at it that way he might be ridden for the rest of his life. But I don't know that. I don't know that any better than I know whether Cheryl might just not come back by noon the next day. There might be an episode that proves to be too much.

You can tell a young man lots of things, though no more than you can tell an old man. The New Word Bible says let all your answers be either yes or no. Beyond this only leads to trouble.

My wife was always the better Christian. She is a good Christian, in fact. It's not a thing she will tell you. She will say, I try and I fail, but there is the grace of God. She didn't believe in divorce. But it came

down to her not believing in me even more. A forty-two-year-old Kelly girl. She told me. I didn't ask to be believed in.

She said to me the day she filed, "God is going to have to forgive me for this."

He may have to forgive me, too.

• • •

I gave my wife everything without argument to settle. A man who uses up the choicest years of a woman's body, fathers children by her, interrupts her worldly pursuits by virtue of holy promises is a man with debt and obligation. The children went with her by her choice and their own fuzzy instinct.

"I won't take the house, Rock," she said, "It's in your family," which was a final act of love and restraint, rather than pulling down on my head the full weight of the law. "But you'll feed and clothe these children," she said.

"I'll do that," I said.

"You don't owe me anything."

"Not 'I'm sorry'?"

"If you are," she said.

"It's fair," I told her. And she gave me her hand, a formal seeming thing to do, to seal the bargain.

I went on working to keep food on my children's table, clothes on their soft-skinned backs, money in the pockets of piano teachers and soccer coaches and the manager of Cinema 6 and the roller rink for my thirteen-year-old daughter and the illicit boyfriend she thinks she has hidden there from her mother.

"If I need to step in," I've told my wife.

"They'll need a man in their lives, Rock," she's said. "Girls go through puberty too soon without a father."

But I've lost my girls.

My oldest calls to ask for favors.

"But your mother has the car, sweetheart," I say.

"She does," my girl says, "but . . ."

"But?" I say.

"How are you getting along?" I ask my youngest, and she says, "Fine."

I used the phone to turn off the gas first and then the water. I'm energy conscious about the lights. I've unplugged all my clocks.

"You going on vacation or just moving? Either way, there's valves inside the house," they said at city water.

"Neither," I said. "I just want it off. And garbage and sewer, all of it. I don't want any more bills."

"I don't think we can do that," city water told me. The gas people tried to refer me to their old-age assistance department.

I live by moonlight and cook over the camp stove. I indulge in a little radio for some news and the bluegrass show on Sunday afternoons, hoping the Lord will look the other way if this is some infringement of the Sabbath. I provide, most weeks, a hundred and thirty dollars for the care and keeping of my family. I figure this is thirty-two dollars and fifty cents a child. Giving my wife a share brings it to twenty-six apiece. Their mother feeds them casseroles and gets them reduced-priced lunch tickets at school.

"Every little bit helps, Rock," she says. The kids have jobs. Two paper routes, a bag boy, one auto parts deliveryman on weekends.

"Keeps them in shoes and pocket change," my wife says. "We're all right."

Truth be told, my wife's mother, with whom they all now live, would never let the brood starve. She's got pension money squirreled away in half a dozen passbook accounts and forty-year-old Treasury bonds. She calls it her legacy. She claims she'll send every one of my children to college. My wife's mother claims she is very rich and that my children work these jobs because they build character and teach fiscal responsibility. My oldest, Ben, is going to the University of Southern California this fall, he tells me, under his own steam and the old woman's auspices.

"Don't sweat it, Dad," he says to me. "I'm scholarship material." He's come over to work on the truck he has hidden in my garage. I lay my palms out, face up. My son is unrolling an orange extension cord

he has plugged into an outdoor socket belonging to my neighbors. The cord runs to a trouble light he has hanging in my garage so he can keep working after dark.

He lays his sockets out according to size on a strip of blue terry cloth. No one has taught him this. He likes things where he can find them. He has a red mechanic's toolbox the size of a baby carriage he straps to the back of his bicycle.

"How about you?" he says. "How are you doing?" This is how my son, the son of my divorced wife and an earlier self of mine, talks to me now. Like an inquiring neighbor. Like a grown-up. "What are you doing these days? Where are you working?"

I can appreciate it.

Still, sometimes when he does this, I take his arm at the wrist and turn it, palm up, to the light. He has a scar down his forearm six inches long and as thick as a coat hanger. The house we lived in when he was a little boy, when his mother and I first married, caught fire from a dry bird's nest and old wiring one night. I ran in for him, upstairs, my undershirt wrapped around my head for smoke and my eyes blurred till I was swimming blind. I pounded on his bed looking for him, but he wasn't in it. I found him underneath, rolled up in a sleeping bag. The fire was in the hall, at the doorway, working up the walls to the ceiling. I left my son in the bag and swung him feet first to smash out the bedroom window. When I dropped him, bag and all, he grabbed at me and slashed his arm on the glass in the windowpane.

I tap the scar with my finger.

"You know how you got this?" I say.

"From love," he says back to me. And then I nod and let his arm go.

I broke an ankle when I jumped out after him. The house was a complete loss.

"It's the pictures I regret, Rock," my wife has said to me, even years later. "We have no record, nothing from the wedding, nothing of Benny as a baby or when he was a little boy, remember, in that red cowboy hat you bought, with his cap gun. Remember?"

I don't remember that picture, to this day.

"Ben," I say to my son, who is rolling back the tarp on his truck, "do you remember a cowboy hat, a red straw one?"

"What hat?" Ben says. "My hat?"

"Your mother says there was a picture of you in it."

"Nah," Ben says. "I don't remember."

"Your mother does."

"She's seeing somebody," Ben says. "She tell you?"

"Her affair," I say.

"You think so?" Ben says, quick to catch an unintended pun. It's not a joke you plan on sharing with your son. Ben hasn't cut his hair in a year and a half; it's thin and hangs straight down his back. He wears his shirts with the sleeves cut off at the shoulder, and his arms are smooth-lined like a girl's. Maybe he's started smoking. I ask him every time he comes over does he need glasses.

"I don't squint," he says.

"You squint," I say. "You look like Clint Eastwood."

"That's not so bad," Ben says.

"You look like Mr. Magoo," I say.

Ben's mother does not know about this truck; it is a confidence between Ben and myself, one thing I keep from her. Ben tells me it is a 1948 Dodge Powerwagon, four-wheel drive. "Clean," he says. "You wouldn't believe it." It is massive; it fills the garage like a whale in a cave. Ben talks to me standing straight up with his arms folded across the hood.

"It's got to be red," he tells me.

"Yellow," I say. "I could see it yellow."

"It'd look like something from a florist," Ben says. "Look." He spreads a plan on the hood and we study over it like architects. He's drawn the wagon to scale, the curved lip of the bed and the arched wheel wells and the bucket headlights. Sketched on the door of the driver's side is *Institute of Archeology.* "That'll be in blue," Ben tells me, "for a touch of class."

Ben's light draws the mosquitoes and moths, and they swirl around his head like a crown while he is bent over the engine. He comes up

for air and says to me, "I tell Mom you're doing all right, lost a little weight, but you're shaved and the house is picked up."

"I tell her the same thing," I say.

"Why don't you let me come live with you over the summer? There's nothing that says I can't, is there?"

"No," I say.

"No which?" Ben says. "No, you can't; or no, nothing?"

"No, nothing," I say. Ben is sitting on the front fender, scratching under his chin where he should have a beard.

"Dad," he says, "what are you doing here? Is this some kind of experiment, or does this prove something?"

"It's what I can afford," I say.

"You got nads, Dad," he says to me. "I'd never say any different."

• • •

This, the thought of my sons growing up without me, troubles me. And my daughters. My boys do not have my size. They take after their mother, birds' bones and the tiny bound feet of Chinese royalty. My boys were doll babies, and even now they have too little flesh on their faces. It's unfortunate when this happens, and when girls take their looks from their fathers. My daughters are robust and bovine. They have my extra height and thick legs and heavy arms. My littlest has jowls like a bulldog, and my oldest has uneven skin and at thirteen takes a man's shoe.

I contemplate this standing out on my fence at night while I survey the neighborhood. I know who sleeps and who sits up late and whether or not they watch TV. I stand eight feet in the air on a two-by-four crosspiece, with my shirt open and my hands on my belly like an idol.

I caught a burglar from up here once. I didn't catch him really—I scared him away by shouting, "Go ahead, the old man isn't home and the wife's deaf as a stump." I remember he turned to look at me, three backyards away, like he was considering the advice. I said, "Come here a minute," and he shook his head no, then waved before he slipped off.

Tonight, after Ben, I am convinced that growing up a boy is no easy thing. I'm convinced it's nothing a father teaches you—but only half

convinced, and not sure that I couldn't help my boys anyway. I've been alive all this time. Some of it should count for wisdom.

• • •

One night a week I spend at the supermarket, where I buy with coupons. Two-for-one is odds I like. And rebate offers, gold mines the average consumer leaves unplundered for the price of a stamp. Potatoes are good. They go with everything. Beans, rice, bread. Staples. In the summers I have my garden. I have a basket on the back of my bicycle, a blue plastic milk crate that says Mountainland Dairies.

Maxine from Lend-A-Hand tells me the grocery store is a fine place to meet women.

Ben will need to learn to shop on his own if he goes away to college. I ask my wife if he knows how to cook.

"He can boil water," she says. "He gets his own breakfast. There's not as much to know these days." She asks me if I've kept up the life insurance.

"The mail goes to you," I say.

Thursday nights are laundry nights. I wash up everything in a tub half full of lukewarm water with a cup of powdered soap while I listen to a ball game or *Mystery Theatre* on the radio. I start first thing when I get home, and everything is out on the line by dark and stiff and dry come morning. In the winter I have clothes draped over banisters and curtain rods all through the house for two days.

Ben doesn't come by on Thursdays. I've told him he's welcome anytime, it doesn't matter.

"I don't want to get in the way, Dad," he says. "You have your life to live."

• • •

Maxine gives me her usual line when I come in for my paycheck, "Rock, I've got a hot tip for you."

I've just finished three days with a local company that manufactures miniature basketball hoops and backstops. We've cleaned and restacked the warehouse and taken inventory. I got a black baseball cap with YELLOW, the name of a big truck manufacturer, stitched on the

front from a sales representative. The job let me put in six hours of overtime, which normally is not allowed.

"I don't want a job, sugar," I say.

"It's a woman," Maxine says. "It's a favor, from me to you. You've been separated more than a year, haven't you?"

"Why don't you get me on at Wentzell's again?" I say. "That was good work."

"For me, then," Maxine says.

"What," I say, "are we supposed to do?"

"Get together for a meal, go dancing," Maxine says. "Do what comes naturally."

• • •

Maxine's friend is a second cousin who runs a yarn and fabric outlet called Knit-Wit. She's trim and tidy. Her blue print jumper is covered with tiny teapots, and she wears rectangle glasses on a chain around her neck like she's tempting age. Her husband has been MIA in Vietnam for twenty years.

"I lost track of time passing," she says. "Suddenly I'm forty and I wonder what I've missed."

In the end, against all better judgment, she's come to the house. I solved all the obvious problems with a barbecue. I took an extra ten dollars out of the overtime money, out of my children's mouths, and now we sit on the patio eating ribs sticky with honey sauce and ears of new corn. We drink a pitcher of iced tea with a taste of sweet straw, and Sylvia, which is her name, asks me questions about my family.

"Is it OK?" she says. "Do you mind talking about it?" One evidence of her extraordinary politeness. "That's what I missed, having a family."

"What is it you want to know?" I say.

"Oh, anything," she says. "Names, dates, first causes." She offers to take my side in things, defend me, sitting with a napkin in her lap and eating with her fingers.

"I used to play baseball," I say.

"Or we could talk about baseball," she says. "Baseball's fine."

She eats well, heartily. She's making a great pretense of thinking of who else she knows with the name Rock when Ben comes up the driveway.

"Hey, sorry," he says.

"Hello," Sylvia says.

"Ben, Sylvia, and likewise," I tell them. "He's family."

"Come eat, Ben," she says. "What brings you? Or are you living with your dad?"

"For the summer," Ben says. He has a duffel bag with him he tosses in the house. I dish up a plate of ribs and corn.

"It's early, still, for corn," Sylvia says, "but your dad picked a good half dozen ears."

"You'll need to call Mom," Ben tells me. "Let her know I got here." Which means he hasn't moved, just left.

"Are your kids still in town, then, Rock?" Sylvia says. "That's nice for you."

"It works out for Ben," I say.

• • •

On the phone, my wife tells me nothing I have to say is any news to her.

"Are you going to keep him, Rock?" she says.

"Do you mean is he going to stay?" I say.

"No, that's not what I mean. I mean, is he going to be up for work and get fed and be ready for school in the fall? Is he going to have clean clothes? Is someone going to keep him from getting arrested?"

"What's he done?" I say.

"Nothing. That's not what I meant."

"He's sixteen years old," I say.

"Seventeen, Rock."

"Seventeen?" I say. "Seventeen."

"Sixteen when we split up, Rock. Seventeen last year. Eighteen and starting college in the fall."

"You keep good track," I say. "You always had that little calendar in your purse."

"I keep track," she says.

"We had a bad marriage, didn't we?" I say. "We must have."

"It got that way," she says.

"But we weren't unfaithful. We weren't unkind to one another."

"I'm seeing somebody, Rock," she says. "Ben's told you."

"Yes," I say.

"It's somebody from church," she says.

"You don't need my permission."

"I would let you know if anything happened," she says. "Why don't you have Ben stay a week or two, see what's what? Is he there now?"

"He's entertaining on the patio," I say.

"Is that what he's been sneaking off for at nights?"

"I've never seen her before," I say. "I think she's older."

"Two weeks, Rock, trial run. Maybe he needs it, I don't know. You might as well know, too, Sissy fell down on the playground. She broke out a front tooth, but it was a baby one. We're going to just let things ride. She has an ugly scab on her lip and doesn't want to go to summer school, though."

"Don't make her," I say.

"We do things in life we don't want to do, Rock," she says.

"That's where I had it wrong all those years," I say.

"Do, do," she says. The closest she'll come to profanity is pretending. "Anything else?"

"Sacco's has some good corn," I say.

"Thanks for the tip," she says and tells me good-bye.

• • •

We'll have dusk as late as 9:30 up until the first day of summer, two weeks away. I need no light to get around my house. The streetlamp across the avenue casts a slanted doorway onto the living room floor, and the bulb over the neighbor's carport burns all night right outside the window over the kitchen sink. Upstairs, where the air is hot and stuffy as gauze because I have left the windows closed, you get some light from the moon as well. I open windows on the second floor and dump Ben's bag on the bottom bunk in the north bedroom. Sylvia is laughing out on the patio.

"What did she say?" Ben asks when I come back.

"You're a potential felon. You're in the lockup for two weeks," I say.

"Are you planning a life of crime, Ben?" Sylvia says.

"A life of ease," Ben tells her. He's on his back with his plate on his belly.

"And so young," Sylvia says.

"Seventeen," I say. Ben has the trim waist of a dancer and the wasted arms of an addict—he looks a young seventeen. He's stretched out with his hands over his head like he'll be starting the backstroke.

"Seventeen," Sylvia says. "My brother was working in the coal mines already when he was seventeen."

"I'm a math whiz," Ben says.

"Or he would have been sold like the others," I say.

Sylvia laughs and then asks if she can use the bathroom. This one thing I have overlooked.

"Problem," Ben says. He sits up straight. "The water's off, pipes are bad. That's our first project for the summer."

"Oh," Sylvia says.

"It's awkward," I say, looking at Ben.

"Hey, we'll go for ice cream, my treat, and they'll have a rest room there," Ben says. "Sorry for the trouble."

Sylvia is a sport about it, and Ben has us pile into the big cab of his Powerwagon. I boost Sylvia up and she sits on my side to keep out of the way of the stick. She compliments Ben on his truck. She pats my leg and says look how high up we are. Ben wrestles the wheel around corners like he's steering a tiger by the ears.

"Look at that dash," Ben says. It's spare and functional—speedometer and oil gauge, pull-out knobs for the choke and lights. "Those days are gone."

Sylvia, in the cab, has a scent of soap and rainwater, of new cloth.

"He should paint it yellow," I say. "Yellow the color of cheesecake."

"Maybe you're right," Ben says.

• • •

Ben leaves us alone when we get back. He's bought us all double-dip sugar cones, and Sylvia has told him thanks and remembers it's been years since she's had one. They are like the ones she used to get in Virginia, before she left home and moved out West.

"I put your stuff upstairs," I tell him. "I'm gone early in the mornings. There's eggs for breakfast."

While I put up the barbecue, Sylvia rocks in a metal patio chair.

"What do you miss most?" she says.

I think about it. "Nickel soda pop," I say. She laughs to oblige me.

"Maxine expects a full report, details, explicit photos," she tells me.

"My sisters used to get together and do that," I say. "I thought maybe it went out with the fifties."

"Girls are girls," Sylvia says. "Maxine's been divorced, twice. Third time's the charm. They've been together six years now."

"She's told me," I say. Ben has made short work of any leftovers. I make two piles of the garbage, wet and dry.

"Anyway, thanks for this," she says. "And you have a nice son."

"I have a couple," I say. "Benny's the oldest, then there's Stephen. Then the girls—Laura, and Sissy's last. She just broke a tooth." The wind starts the chimes while I'm telling her this, the ones with the head of an owl and long wooden tubes of lacquered bamboo. Sylvia comes to me and puts her arms around my waist.

"Here," she says, to offer me a deep kiss and a try at compassion that have both been twenty years in the making.

• • •

Sylvia is asleep now on the couch under the light of the streetlamp in the living room. She is frowzy-headed and calm, and she's dropped her earrings into her shoes where she won't forget them. Ben is tossing restless upstairs in his old room, where it's warm even with the windows open until about four in the morning, when you get a crosswind that freezes you in your sheets. The house seems full, like it hasn't for a long time, and out on the fence, far from sleep, I cannot remember which of my children it is that has asthma.

Good for What Ails You

Kingsley says he is bored. Life bores him, unemployment bores him. "I don't touch my wife," he tells me. She tells me the same thing.

"Boo," Jean Ann says to me, "what's wrong? You're supposed to be his best friend."

She asks me in the kitchen, while Kingsley is out in the yard and I've got a forkful of cold enchilada casserole on its way to my mouth and no answer.

"If we'd only have a baby," she says.

"You'll have a baby," I tell her, my mouth half full and chewing. "What's your hurry if it's just going to look like Kingsley?" Kingsley, no question, got Jean Ann married to him before the lights came up.

"I don't expect it to be looking anything like you," she says, which she must know would come as a disappointment to any man. "He's not himself," she goes on. "He waters the lawn four or five hours a day."

"He's just got troubles," I say. And he does, no job, bills to pay, all the things a man faces in the world. Doubts on top of those, and a future you can't see a way into or out of.

"We all got troubles. What's so damn fine about his troubles?" Jean Ann says, slapping plastic dishes around in the sink and splashing suds and water around the room and down her dress.

"Just that they're his," I say.

"Boo," she says, "it's been five months. He hasn't touched me in five months. That isn't natural."

"It's just other things on his mind," I say. "Maybe he just needs a little vacation."

"He's going to leave me," Jean Ann says, which points to things maybe being worse than I had thought. She pulls the drain plug on the sink and lets the water slurp down. "Just you watch."

"What's he been saying?" I say.

"You've heard all about it, I'm sure. There's not a thing in this world he doesn't tell you. You probably knew what we were like in bed."

"Not a word," I say.

"If he doesn't love me anymore, Boo," Jean Ann says, "the devil damn him. I never stopped." And at this moment she looks as fine as she ever has, in her wet dress with all the little blue and yellow flowers bleached almost right out of it, and soft hair the color of tobacco, with her blue eyes watering up around the edges.

"He isn't dumb," I say, though I catch myself wishing right then he might do something low to turn her against him and somehow toward me forever.

• • •

If it was a matter, I came to decide, between Kingsley bowing out of a three-year marriage that had been most of the time a good thing and my three-week, under-the-counter job at the El Rancho Grande Restaurant and Bar, then Bert Kingsley's marriage was more worth a go at saving. And for Jean Ann, I'd have walked to the moon on my knees.

I told my boss about needing some vacation.

"You're on vacation," he said.

"I guess I quit then," I said.

"I guess you do."

"It's for a friend," I said while he wrestled a huge saucepan of refried beans onto a burner.

"So go," he said.

• • •

"I don't know what it is," Kingsley says. "I'm just real down."

"It's just the times," I say. "This town's been no good to us lately."

"No," he says. He has a habit of hitching up his pants while he gawks around, which he does now. He's watering the strip of lawn running down the middle of the driveway, with the nozzle twisted to a fine, atomized spray, like on oil-cooled machinery.

"Boo," he says, "I need a new start." And this is what I am afraid of, him making any new starts that might be made blind-side, without the aid and company of Jean Ann.

"Let's go to Coeur d'Alene and bust my brother out from the skinheads," I say. "We could fish."

Kingsley twists the nozzle around to jet stream to scour weeds out of the cracks in his driveway. "You said your brother wasn't with the skinheads anymore," he says. "You said he was with the Navy."

"Well, we can bust him out of there for a weekend or something."

"I don't like your brother, Boo," Kingsley says.

"I don't much either," I say, "but he's family."

"He's not good family," Kingsley says. "He was never very good to your mama." Kingsley is watching this garbage cat that drops by regularly, sniffing around for Jean Ann's tabby she calls Bigfoot. Kingsley whistles while he follows it out of the corner of his eye until he judges the range is about right. Then he shoots the cat off the fence with a quick draw of the hose, and we hear it clawing down the wooden slats and landing in the neighbor's raspberry canes.

"We could go up and see my mother, then," I say.

"What have we got to go seeing any of your family for?" Kingsley says. "Not to hurt your feelings, but I just haven't got a lot of interest."

"Well, I'm not asking for your interest in my family," I say.

"I said not to get your feelings hurt," Kingsley says. "I always liked your dad." He rotates his dial back toward spray to wash the dirt and tufts of grass and puncture weed down his driveway into the gutter. "Why don't we go see him if we got to be visiting your family?"

"I'm not saying we got to go see anybody," I say. "I'm saying let's just go."

"Nothing keeping us here," he says. "Two applications a week for unemployment Jeanie fills out on the weekend and drops off on Monday mornings."

"You're lucky," I say. "I have to do my own."

• • •

Kingsley's also troubled about Jean Ann, who has miscarried now twice. "I'd walk on fire and ashes," Kingsley's said. "I've told her that." He handed her the potato peeler one night by the sink and said go ahead and jab him for every time it hurt. "I'd do that for her if I could take the heartache outside with me after and brush it off into the street. I'd feel better," he said.

"I don't think she wants that," I said.

"I don't think she wants anything from me," he said.

She drove to Elko to see her sister for a week after the second time, and when she came back she was through with it, Jean Ann again, most of the time, tromping through the house in her white cowboy boots with the metal heel taps that make a sound like spurs, and back to work across the street as a dental assistant to I. C. Quint, DDS, home every day thirty minutes for lunch.

Kingsley packed up all the bought baby things while she was away in Nevada.

"It's not unusual," he told me after it happened, "not with a first baby. That's what the doctor told her."

"No," I said. Once I'd heard of it happening to Kingsley and Jean Ann, it seemed I heard of it happening everywhere and almost every day.

"And this the finest country in the whole of the world," Kingsley said. "Tell me where they have better medicine."

"I can't," I said.

And then Kingsley and me both going in the second round of layoffs out at Hercules, the world having less need for rocket motors for U.S. missiles than it did ten years ago. Not that my job mattered, but Kingsley and I got our papers the same day. And now Kingsley stewing and down in the mouth, watering his lawn.

"We ought to go to California, ocean fishing," Kingsley says out in the driveway now, a thing we've read about.

"Bingo," I say.

"Bingo," Kingsley says. Jean Ann comes to look out the door at her husband hosing off the astroturf on their front porch, her forehead a field of worry and the corners of her mouth tugged down.

"Bingo," he tells her.

• • •

I pull up to Kingsley's place in my two-tone Scout, our official on- and off-road vehicle, while Jean Ann is home on lunch break making cheese sandwiches.

"He's out back," she says when I stick my head in the door. She has on her white assistant's outfit and looks like a nurse, only little-girl sexy with her boots. "You want one?" she says. "It's that yellow government cheese."

"We could maybe use a couple for the road," I say.

"Cost you extra," she says.

"I had braces the whole time I was a kid," I say.

"You have a pretty enough smile, Boo," she says. I grin for Jean Ann and go out back where Kingsley is rolling up his hose. They have a big yard here, a gnarled-up maple tree that gives shade for barbecues, with big old roots like broken feet sticking out of the ground, and a little garden patch farther back alongside the old-time garage with sliding wooden doors that has room for two cars, if they ever get two. Kingsley's brother's been helping out with payments on the place as a favor, standing for half each month this year so far.

This is not a part of town that's going to be nice to live in much longer. Already on Kingsley's block there's one house where the lawn's never mowed and a pack of grubby little kids crawl in and out the storm door where the screen's supposed to be. In the next block there's big old places with pillars on the porch like a southern mansion, one where an old man with about a dozen white-haired kids used to live. But it's going downhill. It's a city that's dying, not what it used to be, taking our jobs with it.

"Hey, Boo," Kingsley says. He picks up a white tin bowl of strawberries he's picked for Jean Ann and a soggy bait box of crawlers big as baby snakes he's dug out of his garden last night for just in case.

Jean Ann washes Kingsley's strawberries in the sink and dumps half into a square Tupperware she passes over to me with a bread sack stacked with sandwiches. "Watch out for Boo," she says, "he doesn't swim." She kisses Kingsley two quick ones on the lips and grabs two tufts of his cropped hair in her fists. "Bye, lover," she says.

"Bye, Jean," Kingsley says, and again from the cab of the pickup, "Bye," while he waves and Jean Ann locks the door behind her on her way back to work.

• • •

We tank up at a Sinclair station on the way out of town and snag on-sale six-packs of Coke. Kingsley unfolds the map and taps his finger on the corner of Wyoming. "We could make a detour for fireworks," he says, meaning the Class A ammunition that isn't legal in Utah. "You ever fish with dynamite?"

"No," I say.

"Dynamite's best on a lake," Kingsley says.

Down into Salt Lake City with the lake on the right, we drink Cokes and listen to Neil Young. After we pass the state prison Kingsley gets out a practice weight, a three-ounce rubber teardrop, and he casts out the window with the bottom half of his pole and reels in against the strong current of the wind and the highway at sixty-five miles an hour. We've shot road signs before, and when we were kids hung B.A.'s out the window. This is harmless. There isn't much traffic.

"This is great," Kingsley says, "you know." Then he's quiet again. We head toward the wide yellow valleys and auto graveyards of central Utah, then turn right at Nephi. Though this is not the shortest route to the ocean, it's the best bet for finding my father. We stop on the way to admire the old Mormon charcoal pits at the side of the highway. We are machinists and feel naturally the awe surrounding construction and fabrication. It has been a long time. Kingsley rubs his hands and sighs.

• • •

When we roll out of Delta we start to keep our eyes open for my dad and his rig.

"The things he could do with coffee," Kingsley says. Seven kinds of beans soaked in gasoline and strained through a double layer of denim.

Since his divorce Dad travels the state in an old personnel carrier he bought Army surplus. He turns up the canvas on one side for an awning and keeps shop out of the back along the highways in the southern and central parts of the state, selling artifacts and souvenirs from the desert—arrowheads he chips himself, tomahawks he makes, animals carved smooth and slick from ironwood he imports from Mexico. He molds little figurines from indigenous clay and surrounds each with a story of local voodoo. He was a good father—to both Kingsley, who didn't have his own for very long, and me. He gave us these words to live by: Be upright and aboveboard in all associations with married women, and don't take crap from dwarves.

He keeps in touch by postcard, and generally I know right where to find him, which today is just off the freeway at the dirt road turnoff to Painter's Spring, which is just the other side of the dead white shores of Lake Sevier, where he's been spending a lot of time lately, waiting on the return of old Lake Bonneville.

"Howdy," I say, "how's business?"

"Been expecting you, Boo," he says, which is what he always says. "Hello, Bert." He looks like a crazy prospector with his white beard and overalls that are cut off at the knees. He's got a fishing hat on, poked through with flies and Panther Martins, and he keeps gold-rimmed reading glasses on a chain around his neck. "What's new?" Dad says.

"Back home?" I say.

"Anywhere at all," he says.

"Gas is down a nickel," I say. The sun on my back feels hot and close like an electric bulb.

Dad pulls a jar of pickles from under the counter. "What do you hear from your mother?" he says. "She still spending the rich man's money?"

"They've got a summer place in Jackson this year," I say.

"Jackson's a cheap town," he says, "got no chutzpah. You think she's happy?"

"Probably," I say. Dad has always been one for honesty where relations are concerned.

He nods and works on a crispy gherkin. He's got a little tin fan hooked up to a generator, and behind him on the canvas walls are old war posters with Uncle Sam looking angry and pointing a big finger straight out and saying, "I WANT YOU." Dad's got bonds stacked up against retirement and a place with the V.A.

Kingsley's fingering a kachina doll. "What'll this do for my luck?" he says.

"Change it," Dad says, "bad to worse."

• • •

Lake Sevier gives the optical illusion of water from the heat waves rolling off the white salt of the lake bed. It's marked in blue and white dashes on the map and says underneath the name "Intermittent," but I've never seen a drop out there, winter or spring. Dad sent a picture once of himself holding up a bleached vertebrae like a prize bass.

I have to prove to Kingsley nothing's there by driving out onto the lake bed.

"See," I say. Kingsley flips out a long cast and reels in alkali dust.

Dad pulls the carrier up to the lake shore and invites us for dinner. We set up lawn chairs under the awning and Dad fries up Spam and canned potatoes the size and color of boiled eggs on a can of Sterno. He throws in handfuls of red pepper and salt and chilies. We shovel it down and sweat into our plates. We eat Tootsie Rolls Dad passes out like cigars for dessert. He's got a sweet tooth and has always kept restaurant packets of sugar in his glove box for snacks. He wants to know why we're out of work.

"The collapse of the Soviet Empire brought the missile business on hard times," Kingsley says.

"It's a kinder, gentler world," I chip in.

"Not that it matters," Dad says.

Kingsley's burning his old shoelaces in the Sterno flame. He dangles them from his fingers, and they go up like flares. "Doesn't anybody bother you out here?" he says.

"Who?" Dad says.

"BLM? The law?"

"It's trouble waiting to happen," Dad admits, "what with the Californians fleeing like Israel coming out of Egypt. Nothing has a value until somebody wants it. Then there's a potential for profit." He likes the desert. He likes it here on the white shores of Lake Sevier, waiting for Lake Bonneville to come again. It's the bones of an inland sea, the carcass of an ocean dead and gone a million years. All along the mountains of Utah you can find seashells in the foothills, see water lines on the benches.

"The Indians used to paddle the length of the state, many moons, to trade across the big water." Dad does hand motions when he tells this part, ancient sign language. He points out that a mountain to the northwest looks like the stern of a giant petrified ship, dry-docked when the lake went.

Kingsley admires the resemblance.

"And I've got a mine out there," Dad confides to us.

"What kind?" Kingsley says. He leans over to my old man like a partner.

"Bones," Dad says. "Whale. A big one, one of the old buggers, with tusks."

On this count, I think Dad might well be full of bulldust.

"Where?" Kingsley says.

"Out on the lake," Dad says. "A couple of hours."

"Hours?" I say.

"When's Lake B. due back?" Kingsley says.

"Any time," Dad says. He's got an inflatable raft strapped to the top of his truck. "Readiness is all. You've heard the story of the ten virgins?"

"Not since high school," Kingsley says, though it's two different stories they're talking about.

• • •

Kingsley and I roll out our bags on the lake bed in Dad's raft so as not to be surprised. We tell Dad good night, then lay back and look at the dark sky where the stars are thick as freckles.

"You miss Jean when you're gone?" I say.

"Enough," Kingsley says.

"What do you miss most?"

"There's no one thing."

"How you come off getting a woman like that is what I want to know," I say while Kingsley is giving the seat in the raft a couple of blasts with the pump to blow it up for a pillow.

"If I had Jean Ann . . ." I say.

"I'd kill you," Kingsley says. He stretches out on his bag with his arms folded over his stomach.

"I didn't mean like that," I say.

"Get you a wife, Boo," Kingsley says. "Then you'll shut up about it."

"Never mind," I say.

When he talks again, Kingsley says, "I'd like to see that mine. We got time."

"It's half a day out into the desert, on white salt. It'll burn our eyeballs out."

"It's a freak of nature," Kingsley says. "This could be your one chance in a lifetime."

When he puts it like that, I know I will have it hard when it comes time to refuse.

• • •

We leave late in the afternoon in an effort to sidestep the heat of the day. Dad sees we get outfitted with canteens and runny sunblock.

"You can dig for water if you need it," he says. "Strain it through a handkerchief first and boil it twenty minutes when you can." He gives us provisions, a white sock full of blue cornmeal tortilla chips and yellow cans of chili.

Kingsley has a compass on his watch—and an altimeter and something that measures water pressure and another gadget that marks the phases of the moon. He can tell direction by planting a stick in the

sand and waiting an hour for the shadow to move if he has to. He drains a Coke, then smashes the can under his foot and leads us off into ruination.

We wear towels wrapped around our heads and down our necks like Legionnaires. Kingsley has on a mesh pith helmet and black cat's-eye sunglasses that make him look like a movie director. We're gone half an hour, and he says he can see water in the distance where the air ripples like gas fumes. "I can smell it," he says.

"The Pacific Ocean," I say. More likely it's the steam off my brain gathering into a cloud over my head.

"I'll bet you," Kingsley says. He takes out his pole. "And there's a fish out there the size of the planet."

I tell him he's crazy. Crazy, crazy, crazy.

"Boo," he says, "don't you believe in anything wonderful?"

"Crazy," I say.

We walk south until sunset, burning the deep color of tomatoes from the glare off the white salt. I have blisters rising on my face from the sun and a tingling on my skin from a fever coming on. We stop where the whale's ribs rise up like blooms on a skeleton flower. The salt and clay lay piled along either side of the spine in long rows like gopher burrows.

"I'll be damned," Kingsley says. "I will be damned. What do you see, Boo?"

"The moon," I say. "Stars." Kingsley whacks one of the bones a friendly slap with his hand.

"How do you think it died?" he says.

"Alone," I say.

"It got trapped when the lake went down," Kingsley says, "cut off from the ocean." He's standing spread out in a big X, reaching to touch fingers and toes in the barrel of the whale's belly.

"And then it got very lonesome," I say, "and then it got very thirsty, and then it died."

Kingsley looks at me. "Something like that," he says.

• • •

Kingsley starts gathering driftwood. The water out of the canteen is lukewarm, but it feels icy down my neck. I watch Kingsley laying his finds out side by side.

"What are you doing?" I say.

He takes a length of rope out of his rucksack. "It's a raft."

"What for?"

"If the water comes up tonight."

"Which water?" I say.

"This whole place," Kingsley reminds me, "used to be covered in Lake Bonneville. Half this state was under water a thousand feet deep. You're walking on the ocean bottom. That peak up there, that's what islands look like underneath. You don't mock water out here."

We have a half-day walk back to the Scout. I lick the blisters on my lips. I wring the sweat out of my bandanna, and I mock water.

"Bring it on," I say. "Bring down the rain, bring on the runoff and the spring thaw, bring on the whole of old Lake Bonneville." I howl like a wild dog and flap my arms like an owl. "Bash open the windows of heaven," I holler. "Break up the fountains of the earth."

"Boo," Kingsley says, "hush up."

"What?" I whisper.

"Don't fool around, Boo," he says.

"Who's fooling?" I say.

"I won't be responsible," Kingsley says. "I won't have you on my head."

"I absolve you," I say. I plaster a chunk of gray clay on his forehead. "You're crazy."

"There's things you got to respect, Boo, big things you don't know anything about."

"There's things I got to do," I say, and I turn away from him to let down my pants and water the desert. The land of old Lake Bonneville.

Kingsley shares a can of cold chili and a couple of dry bread heels with me for dinner. I shiver from fever and the cold coming up at night in the desert. There is a wind, first out of the south and then the west, that swirls the white dust like ash. Kingsley builds a cross he

notches on one arm. He lines it up with the Little Dipper and plants it a foot in the ground pointing north. He has a harmonica, but all he can play is "When the Saints Come Marching In," and he plays it softly, like a ballad, while I roll myself up in my poncho and turn my face out of the wind to sleep. I take Kingsley's rucksack for a pillow, and I dream about swimming pools and ice cream bars.

I wake up once to see Kingsley on his raft, squatting like a cave man, sifting a handful of the sand with his nose to the wind. He turns to me. "Get up on the boat, Boo," I imagine he says.

I close my eyes again and see nothing.

The rains come before morning in a gray shower that soaks us through and lasts till noon. When the last drops fall, the world is silent as a cymbal. We stand on a gray patch of driftwood and look at the water in the desert, the mountains in the distance turned to shoreline. We're small specks and adrift like trash on the spawn of ancient Lake Bonneville. Kingsley's cross points like a signpost. He tugs it out of the water hand over hand and passes me a camp shovel.

"Paddle," he says, and we push off toward the Scout.

When we get there, Dad is splashing alongside his rubber boat, fiddling with a little outboard motor. "Genius," he's saying, "living genius." He gets his outboard fired up and putters out onto the lake, off toward the horizon. The whole place smells strong of salt and life like the ocean, with the water warm as a bath.

I wade over to the Scout and start tossing gear in through the window. "I want something cold to drink," I say to Kingsley. "Then I want a half pound of red beef and a bed."

Kingsley is stirring around back in the hatch, sifting through stuff and dumping things on the raft behind him.

"What?" I say.

"I'll be back, Boo," he says. "You can tell her I'll be right back."

"Not me," I say.

"I'll call," Kingsley says.

"No," I say. I jerk a Primus stove out of his hands and dump it back into the truck.

"You've got love back that way," I remind him to his face while I point up north. "What else have you got to go off looking for?" But Kingsley is on the raft with a pile of supplies.

"Boo," he says, "I'll be back." He shoves off, and I watch him pole into the distance until he looks like a stick man.

"What am I supposed to say?" I yell.

There is no echo. There are not even birds out here to make a sound.

I slosh to the freeway to flag down a friendly four-by-four, and in an hour we have the Scout winched out of the mud and back on the road. I tell the driver that I'm good for a favor if he's ever in my neck of the woods, and he waves it off.

"We all count on luck," he says. "Be a Good Sam."

I tinker with repacking for a while, then I make a late lunch. A half dozen times I strap on a daypack and a canteen and start out, but I get no farther than the water's edge. Finally, after the sun goes down with no sight of Kingsley, I fire up the Scout and go.

In an hour, I pass the lights of Delta, heading north, keeping my speed down to forty miles an hour. The waters of Lake Sevier lay behind me now, and I figure with stops and this late start, I can stretch out the trip back home till morning.

Slangfontein

While they drove, Graham and Tokkie listened to the rugby over the radio. It was all Western Transvaal this year; there was nobody to stop them. They had a scrappy center who was always giving the "up yours" sign to the other team's crowd after a try. Graham had the build for rugby, but he didn't have the speed in his chunky feet.

"I played when I was a kid," he told Tokkie when she asked. "Everybody did."

Tokkie, Graham's girl, lived in Kimberly, and when she wasn't away at teachers college, Graham drove there every second weekend when he could. They would go together to pick up his dry goods on Saturday morning and spend the day at Riverton on the dam or just out at her grandmother's place watching sports or the "A-Team" or some other rubbish on the television. Even once he had spent a day fixing plumbing in her flat.

"I can help," Tokkie had said. But mostly she'd sat and read magazines.

This morning, though, she had wanted to turn around and go back out to the *plaas*, the farm where Graham was living with his grandfather. They were at Checkers, where Graham was buying mealie meal and tinned milk, soap, paraffin for the lamps, iodine for the

sheep. Tokkie tossed in a paper sack of rusks and asked how was Oupa, his grandfather.

"Ag, always the same," Graham said, scanning down the aisle. "I hear they've got milk in boxes now you keep on the shelf."

"They've got powdered, here," Tokkie said.

"I never liked the stuff," Graham said. "It's all we had in the Army."

"It's all anybody has in the Army. When's your next camp?"

"December," Graham said, "around Christmas."

"That's not fair," Tokkie said.

"It's not so bad."

They piled the goods in the back of Graham's little Toyota bakkie, in amongst odd boxes of tools and petrol cans, and that's when Tokkie said again, why didn't they spend the day at the farm, Slangfontein.

"It's a long way for nothing," Graham said.

"I've been worse places," she said. "I want to see Oupa."

"Well I see enough of him," Graham said. "Why don't you go, and I'll stay here?"

"And do what? Sit in the back of the bakkie at the lake and get drunk?"

"I was thinking of going to the flicks," Graham said. "Isn't there anything playing?"

"Nothing new. We might as well go."

Graham locked his jaw and headed for her flat.

Kimberly was a funny place, square blocks of square white houses and overgrown gardens in the old neighborhoods that reminded Graham of the towns in old American westerns, but at least it was town. Kimberly had been full of diamonds when the grubbers dug out the Big Hole, half a kilometer across and almost another half deep, by hand. The pool in the bottom now, the color of emerald tinted blue, was shaped like Africa, the shape of a big heart. There were still diamonds, but now Kimberly was a place people visited but nobody really seemed to want to be. A boneyard for leftovers from the old miners and the camp followers.

"We've got Baskin-Robbins, though," Tokkie would say, so he would take her, Saturday nights, to get American ice cream after they had been dancing in the evening, which is what she liked, or to the flicks, which is what he liked best, with nothing of the sort out on Slangfontein. On Sunday morning he went to church with Tokkie and her grandmother. He liked to see Tokkie in the church, wearing her hats. She was only twenty-four, but very solemn about her churchgoing.

"It won't hurt you any," she would say, "not once in a month."

"Oupa listens to the service over the wireless Sunday nights," Graham said. "He puts on a collar and a tie, and when the dominee says, "*Kom, ons bid,*" he bows his head and moves his lips right along, saying, "*Ja, Here, ja,*" until the whole thing's over."

"He's from good old stock," Tokkie always said.

"Vandermulen, blood and bone," Graham would say. "Reformed Church, *pap 'n vleis* for supper, *Kaffir* this and *Kaffir* that."

Graham wanted a weekend away, away from the farm and away from the old man. He wanted something to look at besides clouds and dust and sheep. He bought petrol, filled the bakkie and three five-liter cans while Tokkie changed up in her flat. There was an extra four hours' travel ahead, an extra tank of petrol.

"Is it all right?" she said one last time as she came up to the bakkie.

"It's your idea," Graham said, facing off with her in the street. She eyed him only for a moment.

"Come on, then," she said. She tossed a bag in between them on the seat when she climbed in and tuned in the station while they left town.

• • •

Outside now was the Orange Free State, flat, gray-brown soil with clumps of bleached grasses and rangy trees, stone-hard pans with a layer of water looking like a reflection. Sometimes the land reminded Graham of salt—coarse, dark salt.

He had money on the five-year drought breaking this winter and spring, ten rand with an Army mate from Potchefstroom, payable in drinks next camp. There had been storms in Natal and the Transvaal

that had poured down enough rain to wash out roads and trees. But not yet here. A month back, on the road between Bloemfontein and Kimberly, he had watched the low wall of the Krugersdrift Dam rise out of the desert soil like a mirage. The berm rolled on like the top of a long tunnel until you passed the gates where the sign said Krugersdrift Dam. But there wasn't any water. Just a wall.

The reservoir on Slangfontein was low, but not so much more than the year before. There was the windpump that would need attention this afternoon. He'd told the old man *Ja*, he'd take care of it; *Ja*, when he was back.

"I'm going to have to work when we get there, now," Graham said. "The old man is going to want the pump done. There's my day off."

Tokkie pulled a face. "When's lambing?" she said.

"Soon enough," Graham said.

"I want to come out and see."

"My pappie says he might be up for the sale this next year. Says now he's got an interest."

"Maybe he does," Tokkie said.

"He does," Graham said. "With me and the old man out here, he gets two for one. He hasn't had that since my brother left home for the Army."

Tokkie had his hand when he didn't need it to shift gears.

"Why do you hate your family?" she said when Graham left off talking about his father.

"It's just what we do," Graham said.

• • •

They stopped on the way to fix the sign at the crossroad to Slangfontein. It had broken off the chain at one end, and the grinning snake making the letter *S* was lying on its back now, staring at the sky instead of standing on its pointed tail and grinning off toward the farm.

They left the bakkie in the road with the door open and the game turned up loud against the wind. Graham predrilled a narrow hole with a brace and dripped it full of glue, then wound in the new eye screw, making the last few turns with the square shank of a screw-

driver run through the eyelet. The name *Slangfontein*, "fountain of snakes," came from the snakes that crawled over the place. They got in the house and the sheep barn, lived under the *stoep*.

"We've got our fair share," Graham said when people asked.

"Who named it?" Tokkie said.

"I don't know," Graham said. He didn't know who, and he didn't know how long ago. His mother used to worry about him and his brother Dicky playing outside here when they were little and sent to Oupa and Ouma over holidays. He and Dicky saw a sheep once get bitten by a little cobra and then saw Oupa kill the sheep with an axe.

Graham left the sign swinging in the wind, the snake upright on its tail, grinning behind his back as he drove for the farmhouse over the flat land that stretched out beyond the horizon.

"It must have been Oupa who called it that," Tokkie said. She was sitting with her hands between her knees to get them warm after being out in the wind and the heater in the bakkie busted.

"Maybe," Graham said. He was talking loudly and watching for the bumps in the gravel road. "His brother's supposed to be buried out there someplace."

"Did he live out here, too?"

"No. Got his head bashed in with the butt of a shovel handle."

"What happened?" Tokkie said.

"They had a fight, him and Oupa," Graham said. "The brother was supposed to have started it, and he had a knife. Oupa had better reach with the shovel and broke his head. Buried him on the spot, without coming back to the house, and never told anyone where." Graham thought he was probably buried under the dam, out in the ground under the water.

"That's the story anyway," he said.

Tokkie sat quiet and stiff, staring out the windscreen. He reached out with a closed fist and banged lightly on her head. He had asked her when he'd known her just a little while how she got to be called Tokkie.

"I do this," she'd said. She'd opened her mouth and rapped on her head with her knuckles. It made a hollow knocking sound, and loud,

like the beetle they called her after. "Tok-tokkie," she'd said.

"Talky," Graham always said. "Talky, talky." Though he liked her for that because of all the quiet out on Slangfontein.

"Do you want to go back to Kimberly?" she said. She looked at him now, sincere, waiting for an answer, and Graham gave in.

"We're here now," he said.

• • •

There was a lot of bad blood between fathers and sons in this country.

Andre Steenkamp told him once, while they were in the Army, drinking at Welkom a few hours from Slangfontein and looking for rides, "The Free State is the Afrikaner, man. It's as hard and as thick, and it's been around as long. His kind's been around forever. You got to admire him."

Graham told Andre, who was even more drunk than Graham, that he hadn't been born in the Free State. He was born in the Cape. "Port Elizabeth," he said.

"The Free State," Andre went on, "is full of old bones and dark secrets." And Graham had thought of his great-uncle, supposed to be dead under the water on Slangfontein.

But Graham's father had been born in the Free State, out on the *plaas.*

"You going to go out and live with the old man?" he'd said when Graham told him he was going to Slangfontein. "Eat *pap* and bang sheep?"

Graham was old enough to answer back, and bigger than enough, but he didn't then.

"Think you'll get him to leave you the place?" his father said. "That what you think?"

"Sure," Graham said.

"I got nothing for you," his father answered.

• • •

Graham blew the horn when he pulled up to the house. He yelled for Oupa as he climbed out of the bakkie, not listening for an answer while he loaded a box under each arm. Tokkie went in front with a

bag to open the door. Oupa had built the house mostly. He put in the cupboards with the narrow wooden doors around the kitchen and shipped in the big wood-burning cookstove from somewhere in the Cape. He framed the swing-open-and-out windows and hung the Dutch doors, which stood with the top half open in summer for air and the bottom latched to keep the animals out and the children in. The roof was corrugated tin that the rain, when it came, banged down on like stones, and the step Oupa poured had cracked and pulled away from the foundation. The snakes lived there now, hibernating through the winter.

The kitchen was dark in the corners with no lights lit.

"I'll cook for you," Tokkie said while she lifted the lid on the stove to check the fire.

"There's stuff around that's left over," Graham said.

"*Sies*, no," Tokkie said. She lugged out the sack of mealie meal to mix up *pap*, the sticky white cornmeal Oupa stirred up for breakfast and supper. Graham set leftover meat in the warming drawer and put away his groceries. He liked rice better than *pap*. The old man would and often did eat *pap 'n vleis*, mealie meal and meat, three times a day. Graham had noticed the weight he put on himself after he first moved out. He felt the new tightness in his clothes, and when he stood naked in his room at night and looked down, he saw his gut starting to paunch out and he felt his butt sagging. Tokkie saw it in his face.

"Look at you, all baby fat," she'd said when she'd first come back from college two weeks ago. She could grab his sides just above the waist and hang on.

"It's the old man's *pap*," Graham told her.

"It looks good on you," Tokkie said. "You look *lekker fris*, fit," and she pounded on his chest and arms.

The one time she had come out to Slangfontein, she had made a party of cooking on the old wood stove. She was setting herself busy doing it again, putting on peas, asking Graham for onions and tomatoes, which he didn't have, for salad.

"*Bore kos,*" she said. Farmer food.

"Where did you learn to cook like that?" Graham said.

"My Gran," Tokkie said, "good proper Englishwoman stolen away by one of you rugged sons of the earth."

"Go to hell," Graham said, but it felt good to laugh out here.

• • •

He didn't usually think of Tokkie during the day—not until evening, when there was no phone, no electric light. He had taken to playing mouth harp when the old man dragged out his concertina during the winter nights, when he couldn't make the drive to Kimberly every night, with Tokkie not there anyway, and the cold and the dark drove them both inside early. They traded hearty verses of "Sarie Marais," though neither of them could sing, but there was no one to hear:

My Sarie Marais
Is so ver van my hart
Maar ek hoop om haar weer te sien

My Sarie Marais is so far from my heart, but I hope to see her again . . . Early on Graham had made the mistake of saying to the old man, "You sang that one around the fire with old General Kloof, hey?" thinking to make a joke or maybe set the old man off talking about the war. But Oupa only brightened up just a moment, just to say, "*Ja,*" and then Graham lost him to whatever he remembered of riding with the local commando to blow up blockhouses and rail lines while the English papers took the Boers' side and made General Kitchner out to be a bully.

And Graham, out on Slangfontein on those winter nights, thinking at first he might turn *maal* himself, crazy out there alone with the old man.

Graham yelled for Oupa again from out the side door, then put on a coat and went out to look for him. He heard a sheep bleat and the old man's cursing carried on the wind. He was somewhere around ninety now, Graham's grandfather. He made a pretense of doing a day's work, put in a good showing, but he moved slowly and worked at

maybe one or two tasks a day, little projects he set his mind on and didn't tell Graham about. They saw each other in the mornings sometimes, and nights, though sometimes Graham left the old man the house to himself while he listened to the news or sport on the radio in the bakkie. They moved around each other in passing orbits, without real friction, but with the strong forces that push and pull. But the old man was harmless these days.

Graham saw no evidence for his father's claims that Oupa was lazy, that he let the farm go to hell, that he was a drunk and didn't know head from tail on a sheep. He didn't believe his father about anything now, hadn't since before he'd gone into the Army. That was the one piece of good advice his brother Dicky had left him with.

"Pappie's a liar," he said. "He's been a liar every day of his life."

Maybe it was a lie, too, that his father had a mistress in a beachfront suburb like he claimed. He took Graham once, when he wasn't even a teenager, to meet her. Graham couldn't think what it meant back then, when they rang at a little flat with two milk bottles by the mat and nobody came to the door.

"She's not in," his dad said. "What do you know?"

His father had married English out of spite, as English as he could find for himself around the mine hostels out at Carletonville. And that was Scottish, the second daughter of an immigrant mine engineer. He'd brought her to Slangfontein, sent her there, really, right after the wedding, already two months pregnant. Maybe to show them what he'd done, maybe out of spite again, too.

Oupa had told Graham, yelled at him in English when he was younger and doing his Army service and had come to Slangfontein, "You were born in this house. You were born upstairs here, after six months."

"So I'm another bastard, *nog een*," Graham said back, translating for the old man's benefit, though it must have been his older brother Oupa had been talking about.

Ouma wasn't dead yet then, and she called Oupa a liar, as if it could make a difference.

That's the way he and the old man had got along mostly, at first. Toe to toe and fuming like pots. When they played the music through the winter, they usually quit because one of them was playing too fast or singing the wrong words. Mostly Graham. Mostly it was Oupa saying, "*Dis Englise goed,*" complaining about anything he thought wasn't Afrikaans enough.

The blood was bad way back, back as far as Graham knew.

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He found the old man working away with shears on the crutch of a ewe, clipping back the matted hair where flies bred. They were at it all summer long in the heat. He didn't know why the old man was doing it now. He didn't ask him.

"Oupa," he said, and the old man started and cut into the ewe's tender skin. Graham held the sheep while Oupa dabbed at the wound with iodine. "*Jy ken mos vir Tokkie?*" Graham said as the old man finished. You know Tokkie?

Oupa said, "Eh?" and flapped his arm for Graham to let go the sheep. He had his shaking hands and pants stained with flecks of iodine.

"She's at the house," Graham said, "cooking up dinner."

"Heh?" the old man said.

"Supper," Graham said. "*Kom ons eet.*"

The old man bared his couple of bottom teeth over his lip. His pants were big in the crotch and legs, like there was a man of sticks inside them, all muscle and brittle bone, and there was a little brain that sent messages like eat and piss and swing and dodge. Graham dropped the iodine and the cutters in the pasteboard box Oupa had carried them out in while Oupa stood digging in an ear with a finger. Graham picked up the box and headed for the house.

"*Kom,*" he said, and the old man followed.

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Tokkie had cooked everything down to a pulp and put sugar in the vegetables, the way Oupa liked. She set out three tin plates with the

forks and knives she could find and mixed up a pitcher of milk neither Graham nor the old man would drink.

"Hullo, Oupa," she said, when the old man came stomping in the kitchen.

"*Die wind steek jou deur, jong,*" he said to no one in particular. The wind will blow right through you.

"*Kom*, sit," Tokkie said, making a place for the old man at the head of the table. "*Bore kos,*" she said, and she laid out the pans of *mielie pap*, peas, pumpkin, a platter of greasy mutton.

"*Ja,*" the old man said at the sight and smell. "*Ja,*" and banged his fist on the table.

Tokkie spoke in Afrikaans, not the thick intonation of the Boers but with a more nasal, lighter accent. She asked Oupa, "Do you remember me?"

"*Ja,*" he said, she was a pretty girl.

No, she said, not her.

Ja, the old man insisted. *Baie mooi*, very pretty.

"You know I've been away at teachers college, down in the Cape."

Yes, the old man said. That was good.

"I've been away all winter," she said. And the old man ground away at the tough meat and let the girl with the brown hair that hung in tight little curls like fishhooks talk to him all through his meal.

Graham sat at the table where he could see through the doorway out to the *stoep* and watch what served as a garden through the glassed-in porch. It was October, still early October, and the *wrinkles*, the little cobras that nested under the thornbush, weren't out yet and neither were the bunnies that came to play on the short grass and eat in the vegetable garden. It was going to rain this afternoon, not enough to add anything to the reservoir, but just enough to turn the wind colder and pock the dust and make the gravel shiny. Maybe a little more.

The winter hadn't been bad, just dry. And long, with Tokkie gone and his mother in hospital and him only getting news from an aunt because his father wasn't sending any. Not a word about it out to

Slangfontein. Twice after Christian, a mate of his, had rushed out cables from Jaggersfontein with bad news about his mother, Graham had packed up the bakkie to drive to Port Elizabeth. Both times when he got to town and a phone, her condition had turned around, and he'd gone somewhere for a drink, or called Tokkie from the tikkie box, and then gone home. Christian called Graham's aunt himself first after that, before dashing off to Graham with the news.

Graham had called his father to leave Christian's number, in case there was any news or emergency.

"How's it any of his business?" his father said.

"What happens to her is mine," Graham had barked back. The fight went on for half an hour, the longest he and his father had spoken since Graham had left for Slangfontein. Graham stayed in the bakkie outside the house when he got home that night, still shaking in a rage that left him afraid to go inside, afraid he might see anyone at all.

Tokkie was getting along well with Oupa, fixing him food, talking to him in Afrikaans. After dinner she asked him about his medal over the fireplace.

"When did you get it?" she said.

And the old man told her the story about creeping up to a corral and stealing enemy horses, which wasn't the story Graham's father told.

"He took it off a dead soldier, man," was what Pappie said. "He wasn't ten years old when the whole thing started."

Graham had no opinion in the matter now. He left Tokkie talking with the old man on the *stoep* and went to look at the windpump.

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For Graham, learning ranch work was mostly learning to be busy all the time and never finished, never *klaar*. Slow times came, but never stop times. Stopping was like adding fuel to the fires of entropy, the forces that broke everything down, reclaimed everything back to earth: fences, dam walls, bloodlines. The house had a repair list thirty items long, even after the quiet of winter, and these always came last with just himself and the old man around.

There was no coordination in the work between himself and the old man; they made no real plans. If Oupa ran into something he couldn't lift or he needed another hand for, he left it, or he walked around the place until he found Graham and said, "*Kom hierso.*" And Graham usually would follow the old man back and wait for him to get on one end of something or pick up a spanner. Graham made mental notes himself, and at the end of a day he came round and picked the old man up in the bakkie, or he would tell Oupa first thing at breakfast in the morning what he needed help with, and the old man would come along. He'd look over the land and talk in halfway conversation about how this or that had changed. This year wasn't the driest year he'd seen, Oupa had been saying lately, no great chapter in the long history of drought.

Graham didn't know how to fix the windpump. He'd brought his tools with him in a tin box, and his plan was to take the works apart to look for what might be broken. The wind made a bad day for it, blowing cold off the reservoir. He had never known anything to help against the wind. Nights on guard in the Army he froze and shivered until he looked like he was in a fit. Now the wind picked up the cold off the water and blew it over the flat lands of the Free State. The sheep moved in the distance, and the wind blew their sounds away.

He and Oupa had added on three lengths of pipe from the windpump to keep up with the sinking water level the past year. The blades shook in the wind now, while Graham looked for worn washers or gaskets.

Dicky had climbed the windpump, which wasn't so high, back when Graham had been about six years old. When Graham tried to follow, Dicky told him no. "Get down," he'd said, "you can't come up." Graham hadn't said anything. He was busy chinning himself up on the first crosspiece. Dicky threw what he had in his pockets down at him.

"Stop it," Graham yelled.

Dicky screamed, "Get off!"

"No!" Graham said. It was hard hanging onto the metal leg, trying to shinny up like Dicky had done. "No," he said again, choking like

the crybaby Dicky would call him. Mostly he and Dicky played together all right. Mostly they shared things, what they had for toys and sometimes their sweets when they had them.

"Get down," Dicky had said, "get off," and he was sliding down himself.

"I want to come up," Graham said, but he couldn't work up the pole like Dicky had, hunching up like a caterpillar; his arms weren't long enough to reach the next crosspiece. Now Dicky's foot was on his head.

"Get down. Get off," Dicky was saying. He was kicking at Graham's head, and Graham was crying now, really crying.

"Stop it!" he screamed. "Leave me alone!" Dicky kicked until Graham couldn't hold on anymore, until he fell off the windpump and broke his arm.

They made up a story together, but their father beat Dicky for it anyway.

Four years back they had lost Dicky in Southwest Africa, on the Angola border. The Army stuck by the story of his being killed on a patrol by communist-backed terrorists infiltrating from bases just over the border. They promised a medal that had never come. But there were rumors, some about his dying under friendly fire, during a mistaken ambush in the dark. And another story about his being in an accident in a lorry or a biffel and getting crushed or burned, because the casket was sealed before the funeral. A year later someone told Graham that it was a mine, a big one that had blown him into pieces.

"Don't let them tell you he wasn't a good soldier," the corporal who had told him this said. "Don't believe any of it when people say to you, '*Ja*, man, he shot himself or he went bush.'" That left Graham to conclude it wasn't Dicky the corporal was talking about.

Dicky had died just in time, Graham thought, just as the rivalries between him and Graham were turning sour and mean. It had already happened between Dicky and Pappie, as it would and had now with Graham himself. And it was Dicky first who talked about going out to Slangfontein when he was done with the Army, not out of any love for

the old man living out there alone after Ouma died, but because of some understanding he had of things and something he had in common with Pappie and Oupa and out of the old spite.

"Who's the place going to when the old man dies, anyway?" Dicky said. "Pappie's an only child, probably proves there's a God."

Not even when Dicky first talked about coming did he talk about going it together. They would have made a botch of it together; Graham had known it from his first day out.

When Graham's spanner slipped, he cursed and flung it out over the dam. He watched it spin while it flew, jerking round and round lopsided. And he watched it splash and drop under the water.

"Damn it," he said because it was twenty rands worth of good pipe wrench, and he would have to buy another one. If Oupa had seen it, Graham could tell him he had tossed the wrench down to Oupa's brother to work on that end. But the anger didn't hold up long against the stupidity. He could finish without the spanner, make do with an adjustable face and vice grips. If it would rain today, really rain, he wouldn't have to fix the pump at all; he could leave it till Monday. For now, he sat.

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Graham heard the door slam and knew if he turned he would see the old man's head and shoulders from over the reservoir wall. He'd be wearing his oily bush hat and wool coat, blocky *veldskoene* like Graham's own clumpy boots, his face looking a hundred years old.

Graham looked at the sky gray overhead, black and bruised on the horizon with clouds. The old man would tell him it wasn't going to rain.

Graham looked up when he heard boots in the gravel. Before he'd come, his father had said, "Don't get caught letting the old man come up behind you." Graham had never been afraid of Oupa. He was carrying a short-handled hoe now that had a sharp blade and a pick head on either end. He was taking it out with him to the field maybe, maybe to the barn.

"*Nog stukkened?*" the old man said as he came up.

"*Ja,*" Graham nodded. It was still broken. He didn't turn back to the exposed cylinder; he looked up at the old man to let him say what he wanted.

Oupa looked past the water to the clouds. "*Dit gaan nie reen nie,*" he said. It isn't going to rain. Graham watched him shake his head. "*Nee,*" he said again. He pointed to the pump with the hoe, then walked off.

Tokkie came up behind the old man, watching him go. She had a round, open face that couldn't hide anything she felt and dark hair that fell in tight ringlets over the corduroy collar of her heavy coat. Her small eyes were the same color, a burnt brown, with a luster that was almost black. Graham had met her on a fluke, at a dance in Bloemfontein where she had been visiting her girlfriend.

When he told her where he was from, she had said, "That's a long way." As they stood in an open doorway for air, he told her he had come to work sheep on his grandfather's place in the Free State. She'd asked if work was really that hard to find in the Cape.

"Hey, mechanic," she said now, and it made him grin despite himself. She stood with her hands in her pockets, waiting while he put the pump back together. The rain started before he finished, rain that fell hard like hailstones but only scarred the dust and splashed spiky flowers onto the blue tin of his toolbox. It didn't count for anything. He closed up the pump while the wind blew the water on the reservoir into ripples and little waves. People said in the Orange Free State you could see tomorrow five kilometers off. People also liked pointing out that there were no oranges there, that nothing was free, and the place was in one hell of a state.

"Is Oupa going to be all right out there?" Tokkie said. She had her shoulders hunched up and her face turned into the wind.

"I imagine," Graham said.

"He's old," Tokkie said, "and it's cold out here."

Graham pointed to three *rondavels*, little round mud huts, two still with peaked roofs of rotting thatch, out under the dark clouds. The

times he had been sent on holiday to Slangfontein when he was a boy, blacks still lived in the *rondavels*. The farm help they hired now was seasonal. They didn't shear anymore here.

He'd told Oupa they could refit one with a tin roof and the others they could knock down. Oupa said let them be. He had a few field tools stacked in one. That one Graham called the old man's office. He'd come up on Oupa there one day taking care of business. He was sitting on an old sheepskin draped over a stump. He had a cast-iron *potjie* bubbling over a little dung fire and three bottles of lager in the shade of the back wall.

He was giving the bossboy, who had been dead now ten or more years, the business about goings on, and Graham thought he was crazy. But the old man quieted down soon enough and scratched behind an ear, then looked over the dry plain. From the doorway he could see Graff Kopjie, the one little rise on the farm where the earth mounded up like a grave. And next to it was another reservoir, a smaller one, a natural water hole, and the old man watched the sheep wander over to drink, then lift their heads and bleat as though they were telling him hello.

Oupa sat all day, with Graham sitting outside the round house, moving with the shade like an hour hand and getting up to peek in on the old man through the window whenever he heard a sound. Once Oupa scooped up a plate of *pap* from the little pot and rolled it into little balls and ate it with his fingers. Three times he opened a green bottle of lager, still cool from the shade Graham imagined, and he drank each down. And Graham had wondered if he had stepped in the doorway then, while the old man was prying the cap off the second bottle, and if he had said nothing, but sat on the packed ground and leaned against the wall, if the old man would have unstopped the third bottle, and the two of them could have drunk together.

The heat and the boredom had made him almost mad enough to try.

Graham thought the old man might be out there now, with his hoe, out of the wind and what there was of rain. The best place for him, he told Tokkie.

"He'll be all right."

"Why didn't you go in that day?" Tokkie said. They were holding hands, walking back across the dam to the house after he had told her the story.

"Because," Graham said.

"He wouldn't have hurt you," Tokkie said.

"What would he have said?" Graham said.

"Now you'll never know."

"Some places you don't go unless you're asked."

"Rubbish," Tokkie said.

In the house, while Tokkie cleared away dishes and Graham set water on the stove for tea, she asked, "Did he really ride with General Kloof?"

"He would have been ten or eleven years old when the war ended," Graham said. He shrugged at it. "I guess that was old enough, though. He's got a scar on his neck Ouma used to rub with liniment."

"How old is he?" Tokkie said.

"I don't know, about ninety, I guess."

"Do you think he stole the medal?" Tokkie said.

"I don't know," Graham said, embarrassed now that he had mentioned his father's story. "I don't know if anybody gave it to him officially, but I guess he earned it. His mother died in the confinement camps, and a sister."

"Do you want to live to be that old?" she said. He was watching her work, listening to her talk, and he was thinking he liked it all right. Everything needed cleaning and paint. He saw that when Tokkie came. He had taken on a few of the repairs over the winter. And he'd swept and kept the ashes hauled out. He had just about gone crazy. "Why don't you write me?" Tokkie had said when he'd put a call through once from Bloemfontein. "Why don't you put in a phone on that place?"

"Your brother's medal never came, did it?" she said now.

"No," Graham said, "it never did. That's the Army for you."

"You and your brother got along, didn't you?"

"We did," Graham said.

"So would you have come out here together if he hadn't died? Made it a family business?" She was wiping the tin dishes and stacking them away in the cupboard.

"No," Graham said.

"Why?"

"Before Dicky left for the Army, he thrashed me. He made me cry, because it hurt and because I thought he hated me then. He said, 'That's the last time I'll ever be able to do that.'"

"I thought your brother was the one you liked," Tokkie said.

"He was," Graham said. "He is."

"Was he like your father?"

Graham tossed a lump of wadded paper into the stove and watched the fire fold it into embers.

"My father has no respect for anything in the world," he said. "Dicky wasn't like that."

"Is that what you hate your father for?"

"No."

"What then? Was he a bad father? Did he drink? Was he mean?"

"There isn't a reason," Graham said.

"I don't understand that," Tokkie said, raising her voice. "You say that all the time, but I can't see what it means."

"Instinct," Graham said. "You're born with it. The Vandermulen men are, anyway."

"That can't be."

Graham shrugged. He'd felt it, lived with it, but he'd never been able to explain it, even to himself.

"What about Oupa?" Tokkie said.

"He's just an old man."

"That's all you think of him?"

"That's not bad," Graham said, "considering."

"You're not like that," Tokkie said, softening.

"Oupa and I get by," he said.

"See," she said, covering his hand, waiting until he looked at her. "It doesn't have to be like you say."

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The rusks Tokkie brought from town were split on the tops like clover leaves, hard as crust and spiced with cinnamon. Oupa liked sweet rusks to leave in his tea until they melted into the soft crumbs he could eat.

"It's been a good day," Tokkie said as she laid out a saucer for Oupa when he came in. "Admit it."

"There've been worse." Graham smiled and took his own cup and saucer with him to the *stoep*.

When he and Dicky were boys, the *stoep* hadn't been closed in. The kitchen door dumped right out onto the wide porch running the width of the house. Oupa had worked late hours those summers. Ouma worked at whatever she was doing on the *stoep*, looking up now and again to say, "*Los*," leave off, when he and Dicky got too close to trouble or fights.

She told them scary stories of the weird things in the bush, the little *thikoloshes* with baboon faces that witches rode, ghosts, magic. She told them how her own Ouma came inland on the Great Trek and how her pa rode like Oupa did in the commandos. She told them how Slangfontein was her family land, and Oupa and his brother came to live with the family during the First World War. She was the youngest, and Oupa took a fancy to her and waited until she was old enough to marry. And even then he'd outlived her, even with a twenty-year head start.

Tokkie came out and sat across from Graham. She drank her tea and looked out at the yard without talking. The wind banging outside and the clouds so low the house sat in twilight reminded Graham of winter, the short days and then long nights in July and August. Camp in two months promised a fill of talk and company and the different boredom of military life and laziness. Dicky had taught him to play snooker before he'd left for Southwest, and Graham had practiced to

beat him when he got home. At camp, he and the other *ous* in his unit would sluff off work, sleep in shifts. Graham was an ambulance driver, and there was time for cards and napping with cots everywhere. Sometimes he worked in the theater as an orderly. He saw no difference in a man's blood and a sheep's blood, the mess, the smells, or what he saw when an *ou* lay on the table cut open or rode to camp in the back of the ambulance jacked up on morphine with his leg mashed, none of it troubled Graham.

"You do your job, Vandermulen," his corporal said. "Why didn't you train for a medic?"

"I don't know," he'd said.

"We'll see about it," the corporal said, though that was the end of it.

Graham sucked cool tea off his mustache with his bottom lip. His father didn't mourn Dicky's death. "Stupid," he'd said. "He took a stupid job as tracker. He did a stupid job of it."

"He might have been right," Graham told Tokkie. She was standing, looking out at the garden and the swollen sky, and he moved behind her. "Dicky did stupid things."

"That could have been love, right there," Tokkie said.

Graham had asked his mother if she wanted to come out to Slangfontein to recover, to rest. There was his room upstairs with a full-size feather mattress and a north-facing window. He would move downstairs onto the couch or in the pantry.

"You don't understand your father," she said after she turned him down.

And he didn't. But with no other prospects, he'd come here—but not out of the old spite, he told himself, not to anger his father. To get away from it. He'd learned to work sheep, and then he had met this girl who was here now, whom he had been dreaming about since she'd first come to Slangfontein five months back. She wanted to do another year at the teachers college, she'd told him, a special course, but he could wait through that, too.

While he waited he would fix up the house, and then, someday, gas the cobra nest under the thornbush so they could watch little Vander-

mulens run around the garden. He could get along with Oupa. He didn't have to see his father, and his brother was dead. That left him starting fresh, as he saw things. That left him to start breeding out whatever brought the hate. All this he had thought about over the winter. And he had thought with Tokkie he could maybe do that.

He knew it now, while he stood with her on the *stoep* in the twilight with his arms around her from behind, waiting for her to say she had to be getting on the road for home.

Still Life with Father

These days my father has grown particular about his teeth. They've all been pulled now, and what he's got on his mind are two sets of dentures, uppers and lowers, that he works over with a little brush under the light at the kitchen sink as careful as if he was repairing a watch. For years when it was just the uppers, he used to keep them in his shirt pocket half the time because, he said, they hurt to wear.

"Don't be so fussy" is what he used to tell me, his favorite advice when life wasn't to my liking, when I didn't want oatmeal or whatever else we were having, didn't like the clothes my mother bought me for school.

We're not too fussy now, either of us. Dad stands in the kitchen in his old robe, black and gray the color of pencil smudges and worn thin as gauze, working on his teeth. I do mine in the bathroom, then I make up the hide-a-bed while Dad watches the end of the 10:30 news.

"What time do you have to be to work in the morning?" he's always asking.

"Seven," I say. It never changes.

"Get me up when you go," he says. He's always lying there waiting for it when I come in in the morning, with his hands folded on top of the blanket, listening to the morning news and traffic on the radio. I don't know sometimes whether he sleeps at all.

He gets up for the bathroom twice in the night. He doesn't turn on the light. The house is small, and I can hear him. He's got water in his chest I listen to when he coughs, and his knees are thin. In the morning while I shave he moves around the kitchen. He turns on the radio on the counter and gets together something for breakfast.

I fix up a lunch, fill my water jug, and Dad gets on his clothes to work out in the little yard in the summer or push snow around in the winter. He walks me outside and leans in the window of the truck.

"See you later," I say.

"You check your oil yet?" he wants to know. I'm leaving a stain on the street in front of the house.

"I'll do it tonight."

"Don't let it go," he tells me. He wears a dun-colored hat like Norton on *The Honeymooners*, kind of squashed all around like a flower that's been sat on. He wears glasses with pointy rims like an old man. He is an old man. He is exactly twice my age this year, and I am thirty-seven.

He cuts the grass, an all-day thing, and waits for the mail, while I go pour curb and gutter.

"How's your dad?" they ask me at work.

"Getting old," I say. I wear cups on my knees, and the cement pulls the water out of the skin on my hands till they look like they're made out of old stones, and they don't feel anything like hands anymore. The weight of wet concrete tugs at your bones till at the end of a day you walk like the old troll under the bridge, with heavy feet and lead in your arms.

Thursday we're pouring a square of sidewalk across the street when the junior high lets out. We've got up barricades and police tape, but while we're giving out the evil eye to every kid who walks by even thinking about touching, this old lady comes up from the other direction and wades in three steps and over the tops of her plastic boots before she knows something's wrong.

Dad's better than that.

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I should have married. I know that now.

When I was twenty-nine, I knew a good woman. I told Dad about it, how I knew that she was a good woman. She taught history and home economics at a high school across town. Her name was Annie, and she was older than me, and she hadn't married yet. She was probably afraid of that.

"Paul," she said to me once, being serious in our little yellow kitchen at the house while Dad was out on the front steps or asleep in a chair in the front room, "what do you think?" She was meaning about us.

I didn't know how much it took for her, anyone, to say that.

I laid awake that night, and have some nights since, with my arms crossed above my head, watching the streetlight out the front room window. I've thought about it and I've not thought about it. Either one can take as much attention.

I've thought, So what? and it's an answer that cuts both ways.

I haven't seen her now for six years.

She made good friends with Dad. They went out on a date once, one November after I wouldn't make up my mind. And Dad didn't know anything more about the ballet than I did, but he liked the music.

"You had your chance," she told me when they walked out. She drove them in her little car, and I didn't care a thing about it. I sat home working on an old electric can opener with a soldering gun till they got back. Then they both sat and told me about it.

"It was all right," Dad said.

"Your father likes classical music," she said. "He was humming along."

"Yeah, he does," I said. She drank half a glass of milk like she was nursing bourbon.

"You don't know how strong they'd have to be, those dancers," Dad said. "You can't even imagine."

And he told me later, after Annie was gone, "Those women, Paul, they were beautiful."

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In the winter we cover the concrete with straw to help keep the heat in, and it steams when you pour like some sort of witches brew. I helped pour footings for a condominium in February this year, moonlighting for a contractor friend. I took Dad out in the truck for a ride to see. We bumped over the caterpillar tracks frozen into the mud across the sidewalk and pulled up alongside the foundation.

"Hunh," Dad said.

He wore a wool golf cap and kept the ratty collar on his coat turned up around his ears. I blasted the heater on high in the truck to keep him warm. He wanted to get out and take a look at the hole, so we stood at the edge with our hands in our pockets. I caught his arm once to keep him from slipping.

"You ought to move into one of these someday," I told him, not really meaning anything by it. "They take care of the yard. Anything breaks, you call up and they come fix it."

"What's a place like this run?" he said.

"Depends."

"Sixty, eighty thousand dollars?"

"Some places."

He bent down for a rock and tossed it into the basement like a little kid flipping bread to the pigeons, like his arm was made of tin.

He gets tired easy, so I left him in the truck when I stopped at the store to run in for milk; then we went home.

• • •

When the bills come, and his Social Security in the mail, Dad brings out the lamp from beside his bed and spreads out a ledger and a shoebox file on the kitchen table to work his budget. At tax time the whole thing, mine and his, takes a week. He sits under the sharp light and sorts his accounts into two piles of what he owes and what's come to him. He opens all the envelopes with a heavy rectangle butter knife and reads over every word for anything that might be important.

He's at it all evening, and I don't bother him. I watch TV or move around the house gathering up wash or some other thing. He gets my

share when I get it, a hundred and seventy-five from me in rent. I take care of the food, and I tell him, anything he wants to eat. He does the gas and property taxes, and we split the lights and water.

How we've come to live here is that we haven't moved. There are two bedrooms, but only the one bed now and the pull-out sofa in the front room. There's a bathroom, a kitchen, a little porch. He bought this place with my mother for maybe four thousand dollars, maybe less. We've bought no furniture since she died, except the new TV.

My mother never took up much space in this house, though Dad always said it was hers. It's her sideboard still along the front room wall that she kept polished until the wood shone like plastic, and there are some knickknacks on a corner shelf—two china dolls and a wooden windmill and a blown-glass swan. She and Dad slept in the double bed, and she sat in the third chair in the kitchen, with her back to the stove. I never remember a friend of hers coming over.

My aunt used to, and the two of them would fix tuna fish and lettuce sandwiches for lunch, which they cut into fourths and put on plates, and they drank tall glasses of Coke and ice. Or at nights when Dad was away my aunt might come by and my mother would pop popcorn on the stove. I had my own dish full, and the two of them would set a green Tupperware bowl between them on the kitchen table and spread paper towels out for napkins and play canasta. This was my mother's only sister, and she died when she was fifty-three of a hemorrhage in her brain. And my mother died seven years later, from a stroke, her second, and that was eleven years ago next month.

• • •

There are foods Dad does not eat. He isn't picky, but his guts won't handle acids or hot spice, and an orange or a tomato on an empty stomach might keep him up the night. He does not really like soup. I found this out only yesterday. We heat up a can of Campbell's and grill cheese sandwiches in the frying pan on Sunday nights, and we have done this all my life, but this Sunday Dad sighs while he picks up his spoon.

"What's the matter?" I say. I've taken to worrying about his health. He really is an old man, my father.

He tips a spoonful of tomato soup, cooled down and pink with milk, back into his bowl.

"Hmm?" he says. "Nothing the matter."

"We can have vegetable next time. Or vegetable beef."

"This is fine," he says. He dunks his bread, which he did even before they took out his teeth.

"We can have something else," I say. "Anything you want."

"You never have any less, you'll never starve," he says. "Your mother liked soup. I don't mind it. I wouldn't want it every meal." This is what he says for anything that doesn't suit his taste. But he will eat what you put in front of him if it can be eaten. He's like that, brought up not to complain about his lot. He soaks the crusts until he can handle those, too.

Sundays the paper can take all day to read. We put it on the table between us and swap the sections back and forth till it all ends up in one pile again, folded in half and ready for the trash.

• • •

A late frost this spring kills the peaches, and Dad takes a fall at the end of April. It's nasty at his age, and he cracks a hip. You can't put a cast on it.

"Keep him down," the doctors say.

"How'd it happen?" I ask my father. There are only two steps up to our porch. He missed the second one and went down twisting; he's sprained a wrist, too.

I count out pills for him in the morning, big yellow ones for pain. The doctors decided while he was at the hospital that his blood should be thinner, too, and there are little blue ones for that.

"And he can have aspirin," the doctors say. "Aspirin's fine."

I fill a pitcher with ice water and leave him propped up on the couch so he can see out the window, in reach of the TV. He picks through old *Reader's Digests* and naps. Twice I've woken him when I've called at lunch, so I stopped.

The first Saturday I have home, I put in a railing made of galvanized pipe along the steps. We've been talking about it since before

my mother died. I fix Dad up on the porch so he can supervise. I dig holes and pour two slabs for the uprights. He leans forward in his chair and puts out a hand to steady a post while I check everything for level.

"That's not bad," I say. I've dug my postholes a foot and a half deep.

"It isn't going anywhere," Dad says.

"It's a day late," I say. But it's sturdy. I'll have to wrap it with cloth before winter, to keep our hands from freezing to the bare metal.

• • •

I don't know if he still wants grandchildren. He used to talk about it. I had some little cousins once he liked. It isn't too late. I've met some nice women, people's sisters.

We aren't confirmed bachelors, Dad and me. I just don't feel some days that I've gotten started yet, and Dad's just a little bit old.

• • •

Dad walks with his cane now and a twisting, sidewinder limp. He can still sit with one leg underneath him and work in his roses, tugging out the tufts of wild grass and thistle, beating the dirt from the roots against his shovel. He drags his cane and his leg behind him as he goes. It's hot this summer and sometimes he gets up at five and comes back in before eight with his hair, what there is of it, slicked back from his hat and sweat.

At night he likes to take a walk around the neighborhood. We take the better part of an hour to shuffle around the block, talk to the handful of people left that he knows along the way. Sometimes I'll leave him on a porch until it gets to be nine, nine-thirty. I'll come back and he'll be standing, leaning on his cane and ready to go, like he has been for half an hour and like he will be until he's run out of whatever it is he has to say.

All his friends know me. I grew up here. They shake my hand when I walk up.

"How's the world treating you, Paul?" they say. "Keeping busy this year?"

And if the building market's up or down, either way, they're sympathetic.

"I don't know," they're saying all the time. They have their doubts about most things these days.

This was the place to be just after the war, they tell me. Nineteen eighteen or nineteen forty-five, either.

It's where we are now.

• • •

We've been talking, with everything there is on ESPN, maybe we'll get cable.

We can go a week sometimes and the telephone will not ring.

And sometimes, in the summers on the porch, the air is so good Dad will sit just to be out in it, and maybe read the funnies or the sports. If I get home late, it's where I'll find him, with the house dark behind him and that birch cane between his knees.

If he's awake, he'll look up and lift a hand to wave, watch me as I head up the walk toward him, his only son come home.

Boys

If I had a mother, I have told Duke, she would look like Charlemagne, who is sitting now in the hay at the top of the barn where we all can look out the window at the moon. She has hair the color of hay and ditch grass in the fall, and her face and arms are the color of the white moon in the winter. Her legs, too, except they are covered in scratches like she'd been whipped with a chokecherry branch, and there are little red bites all up her legs and arms from the bugs in the hay. Tonight we've brought her lotion for those, and bug spray that Duke thinks will help. Charlemagne is rubbing it onto her arms and up and down her legs.

"It feels good," she says. She gives us each a smile. "I think it's working."

Duke and I found Charlemagne in the loft yesterday when we climbed up to shoot birds with my uncle's pellet gun. She was standing with a yellow suitcase in her hands like she was waiting to catch a train. "Hi, boys," she said. "Who are you?" We told her our names, and she shook our hands. She asked if we thought anybody would mind her sleeping there that night.

"Help me with this," Charlemagne says now. She hands me the lotion bottle and reaches to undo a button at the back of her dress. She folds the dress forward off her shoulders like wings and unhooks the

strap back there. Duke and I kneel behind her, each on a side, and smear the lotion up and down her back, which is white and speckled like the rest of her.

Duke wants Charlemagne for his mother, too. Duke's Ma is a fat Indian woman with two long braids and a crooked eyetooth hanging over her lip like a fang. The men she brings home with her sometimes stay on for days, to where Duke mostly lives with me here at my Gran's, and Gran hardly knowing the difference.

While Duke and I rub on the lotion, we tell Charlemagne about Uncle Bob's grave over at the edge of the trees, where the fields end. She's seen it today, from the barn. It's a headstone with a little TV screen built into it. You can see where the power line hangs in the trees.

"He was a hero," I say. "In the war."

"What war?"

"The one in Vietnam."

"Let's go look," she says. She's scooted to where she can see better out the loft window.

"He gets mad sometimes if you do that," I say.

"Who gets mad?" she says.

"Uncle Bob."

"Oh," she says.

Duke is eating what is left of the piecrust from the dinner we brought. If Charlemagne stays long, there'll be nights clouded over and without a moon when she'll be able to see the little light from the screen right at the edge of the trees.

"What's your Uncle Bob get mad about?" Charlemagne says, "the noise from the TV?" She's left the dress open in the back to let the wind cool the bites.

"I don't think that bothers him any," I say.

"What's on it?" Charlemagne says. "What's it about?"

"It's mostly of the Vice President when he gave Uncle Bob's medal to Gran and the funeral they had for him. But there's pictures from the war on it, too," I say. Uncle Bob got his medal for getting his butt shot off in a plane. My other uncle, who we call Waddle and who didn't go

to war with Uncle Bob, says this was dumb luck, and Gran tells him, "Shut your mouth."

"Are you on it?" Charlemagne says.

"No," I say. I never knew my Uncle Bob.

She jabs at Duke with her toe. "What about you? Have you seen it?"

I'm watching Duke so he can't lie about it. Gran used to make me lug the flowers she took out for Uncle Bob every couple of days. After she put the TV out there, I remember watching the rockets shooting out from the jungle with flame and smoke streamers like fireworks we go to see in Troy on the Fourth of July. But Duke and I generally steer clear of Uncle Bob's grave.

"Tell me what he gets mad about," Charlemagne says. "What happens?"

I don't want to tell it now. Duke doesn't want to hear it.

"Come on," she says. She's done her dress back up, and she's peeking at the moon through her toes.

I hate to have to tell it. I hate to have to tell it at night when we have to cut across the field back to the house. But Charlemagne wants to hear.

"He yells at you," I say.

"What does he yell?" she says.

Once, after Gran buried the box the Army sent, Uncle Bob's brothers and some friends were arguing about what happened to his medal that was supposed to be epoxied onto the stone under a piece of bulletproof glass. Some of them said it was still there and some said that Gramps had taken it when he'd packed off the spring before. He'd liked it, and before Gran glued it onto the headstone he'd worn it on his suit coat to church.

They went out in a single file line, four of them, through the field to check on Uncle Bob, three of them Uncle Bob's brothers, and my father not with them, him having run off with what Gran calls a hellbound whore out of Shreveport for a warmer winter on the Gulf of Mexico.

I want to stop here, but Charlemagne won't have it. She'll hear it all. She's got her head propped up in her hands and her eyes opened big and bright.

Sometimes this far up in Montana we see northern lights, not in colors but like a fan of searchlights behind the mountain, like something's going on over there. And the night they went to see, the grave was lit like that, with the four of them trooping out in alfalfa up to their boot tops, tramping down a black snake into the hay, and the lucerne closing up behind them like the jungle to cover up their trail. That's how they told it.

"He was out in the clearing," I say. "They were to the edge of the hay almost, and he was at the clearing, stomping mad. And he had yellow eyes. Then he yelled at them."

"Hogwash" is what Gran says. "Bulldust. Shut your mouths."

"There are stranger things," Charlemagne says. She tells us about a logging track way back in the trees northeast of White Sulphur Springs called Deadman's Road. It's just graded dirt with tire ruts, but there's a sign to warn you. And when you drive it at night you come around a bend down into a hollow, and you better not get out to help the old man in the blue truck there that's got a flat tire.

And the white crosses where people have gone off the highway, you see the ghosts sometimes there at night, coming up out of the barrow pit or standing on the end of a bridge. "And you know what they want?" Charlemagne says, and I don't want to know. I can't move. "They want a ride," she says.

Duke just wants to stay tonight in the barn, but Charlemagne walks us back to the house through the green hay bales lined up in the field. She whistles like a ghost wind through her lips.

"What happened to your husband?" I say.

"Oh," she says, "he got lost in the war, too."

"There isn't any war," I say, not one that I know of.

"The Montana war," Charlemagne says. "The Kalispell bitch and bottle fights."

"That's not a war," I say.

"He's just gone," Charlemagne says.

• • •

It's hot out, and Charlemagne's coming with us swimming where Duke and I go. It's a good place, a bend in the river with Russian olives and then bigger trees around and only in the middle too deep to touch bottom. We've brought a big cowboy hat for Charlemagne because she burns red in the sun. She puts it on and says, "Howdy," and Duke and I stretch the barbed-wire fences for her so she can slip through.

At the river Duke and I dog-paddle around in our shorts while Charlemagne sits on the bank and beats puddles in the mud with her heels. The water is slow here but still cold from coming down the mountains, from the Rockies and Canada. We haul up greasy muck from the bottom for wars. We aim for Charlemagne, and she says, "No!" and crabs back away from the water.

When we show her where the rope swing is broken off from where it was on the tree branch, she stands up and says, "Come over here." She grabs us by an arm and a leg, me and then Duke, and twirls us around and bucks us away. She's that strong.

"You're lighter than hay bales," she says. She sends us spinning, sprawled out like bugs, and we scream and fly out over the bright water until she is tired and says, "No more."

"Whose place is this?" she says, resting while Duke spits water in the air like a fountain.

"It's ours," I say. "Mine and Duke's."

"Are we still on your Gran's land?"

I shrug.

She says, "They shoot trespassers around here, you know."

"Nuh uh."

Charlemagne points a finger at Duke and pulls the trigger. He grabs his heart and flies back in the water dead.

"Aren't you afraid of drowning out here by yourselves?" She looks around and finds a long branch she could use to reach us from the

bank. "Keep this here from now on," she tells us. "We'll hide it when we go."

Duke and I climb out and shiver in the sunshine to dry, with our arms across our chests. Our jockey shorts are gray and full of grit. Duke is chunky and brown; I am white and can poke my belly out with air like I do to follow Uncle Waddle around behind his back or suck it to my backbone to show Gran my ribs.

"My turn," Charlemagne says. She's scrunching up her hair and looking at her fingernails. "Go sit on the rocks downstream and get warm." She's poking the water with her foot.

Duke and I go, tenderfooting it through the hard grass. Then we double back. Charlemagne sees us before we can duck down to hide.

"Go on," she says. She's on the bank with her dress pulled off. We go and we don't see anymore.

• • •

After school starts the next week, Duke and I ride our Schwinn Stingrays down the train tracks to get there, mine with the orange whip flag I can pretend is a CB antenna and Duke's with the Wacky Package stickers all over his banana seat. They're beaters, but we don't have to lock them up not to have them stolen. We push along the rails with our feet down on either side like training wheels. Duke chugs like an engine, until he loses his balance and his bike crashes on the tracks while he rolls down the hill into the weeds. I wait while he climbs back up with his jeans all dusty from the gravel.

Duke rides bumping down the ties this time. He goes, "Ahhhh," and the sound bounces up and down like in a car on a rough road. We pass behind where Duke lives, and he farts, then spurts ahead from the extra burst of power. We skirt around the four white crosses at the end of the bridge where the dead families hitchhike off the side of the road.

The fourth-grade class meets on the bottom floor, where if there weren't the grating over the windows you could be up on a desk and out while the teacher was writing cursive on the board with her back turned. We pledge allegiance to the flag and sing "My Country 'Tis of

Thee." The teacher says, "What is the state bird of Montana?" for a quiz.

Duke shows Elise Pommery his state bird, and she gives him one back, like she's scratching up the side of her nose. During art time we'll drive our flip-off signs around our desks like tanks, our middle fingers making the long gun. We pivot around slow to shoot the enemy. We draw battlefields and curly black explosions while we make growling sounds for the engines and the treads deep in our throats. The teacher only ever says, "That's enough," but doesn't send us to the office.

Everybody cheats during math. Elise helps us because she is the only one who can divide.

Outside at lunch two of the bigger boys walk up on Duke. I'm sitting on the jungle-gym rocket, at the top of the second stage. I fold my arms and hook my feet under the bars to watch.

"What's you got?" one boy is saying to Duke. He wears a muscle shirt with the sides cut out. He has hair under his arms, and his name is Malachi.

"Nothing," Duke says.

"Come on, fat boy," Malachi says. Duke just stands there waiting for what's coming. Malachi snaps, scrapes his fingers across his palm. "Give it here," he says.

Duke turns around to run, and the big boys grab his pants. They shove their hands in his pockets to worm the change out, a couple of dimes and a quarter, then they dump him under the monkey bars. Duke lies there on his side while the big boys jerk their chins hello at me and go away.

"What do you bring it for?" I say to Duke. He's still lying there, breathing loud, bent double on his side like a dog.

"They'll beat me up if I don't," he says.

"Well what do you bring so much for, then?" I say.

Duke rolls on his back and closes his eyes to the sun. One of these times Duke is going to go crazy. He's going to grab them by the hair

and bash their heads bloody against the bars. I'm waiting for it every day now.

Duke sits up to comb his hair with a hard rubber ACE he keeps in his back pocket. I climb the rocket and sprawl across the top. I let my arms and legs hang down like a spider and wait for the snitches on the playground to tell me to get down. It's hot for September, hot for anytime. I drop spit that floats down like dandelion fuzz and try to hit the bars.

"What's for lunch?" Duke says. We share mine that Gran always packs in a big grocery sack. The other kids eat in the lunchroom, but we stay on the playground. Duke hucks a sandwich up to me and raisin cookies. The boiled eggs we throw at third graders. They yell, "You suck!" then run for it. The sun on me makes it too hot to move. I'm a prisoner in a cage. All the bars are molten steel, they're charged with electricity. I'll have to hang from my knees, then drop and do a half flip to land on my feet and escape. The ground is a long way down.

Elise Pommery comes over with same-color carrot and cheese sticks from the lunchroom poking out of her pocket. She dresses like her brother who goes to middle school in greasy green corduroys and a brown plaid shirt.

"Hey, Duke," she says. "Hey, Ray." Elise wore a patch over one eye until she was in the second grade. Her mother tied a scarf around her head, and Elise told everybody in school she was a pirate. Now she's gotten a glass eye, cloudy blue like the short drinking glasses you get free when you buy gas.

Elise doesn't want anything, just to sit with us outside the school till the second bell rings. Duke and I have to go in when it does. We can't cut this early in the year when everybody's still paying too much attention.

Duke says after school we ought to ask Elise if she wants to come smoke with us, but I only got two cigarettes out of Uncle Waddle's pack, so I say no. Duke and I have never had a whole one before, just butts, and once almost an inch off a menthol we found half-crushed in

the 7–Eleven parking lot. We're bouncing our front tires up in low wheelies, coasting down the hills with the sun in our eyes. Duke does a siren for me to pull over, then speeds past. We drag our bikes off the road under the bridge over Leman Creek. Duke drops his bike with the back tire dipping in the water.

"The chain's going to rust," I say. Duke is wizzing by the creek, with his back to me.

"Do you have matches?" Duke says.

"Yeah," I say. "I got these." They're in a black book that says in gold "The Blackfoot Lounge." They're the paper kind that were always hard for me to light until Duke showed me how to fold the cover over the sandpaper and rip the match head through.

"You got to be careful doing it that way," he says. He's skipping rocks, the front end tipped up like a fast boat, always three bounces before they plunk. I've got the smokes stashed in a box for Bicycle poker cards that looks closest to Uncle Waddle's hardpacks. I slip one out and pass the box to Duke. Then Charlemagne's behind us.

"Gimme here," she says.

We don't ask. We put the cigarettes in her hand.

"You're too young," she says. She unwinds the white paper in a spiral, and the brown tobacco crumbs float away down the creek. Charlemagne has got her shoes off and her feet muddy from wading. "Why do you come home this way?" she says.

Duke shrugs. He's chewing on a piece of foxtail, sitting on his tipped-over bike.

I am mad at Charlemagne about the smokes. "How come it's your business?" I say. I'm ready to saddle up; I've got my bike swung up against my leg like an open gate.

"Uh, oh," Charlemagne says.

"Go to hell," I say. I'm up the hill for the getaway, but my chain's come off and the pedal slips and drops me onto the bar. "See!" I yell. I throw the bike down the hill and shove out into the creek till I'm up to my waist, but she doesn't say anything. The cold water helps the pinch and burn between my legs and the sick in my stomach till I splash out

on the other side. I keep my back turned until I'm sure I'm not going to cry.

Charlemagne sits down on her side of the creek. She gathers her hair up over one shoulder, with her head tipped to the side. The blonde weeds are up to her shoulders, and her legs are still spotted with bites the color of the little red flowers on her dress. Duke's spinning his front wheel, and Charlemagne is raking through the ends of her hair with her fingers, sitting across from me.

I grab a rock I am going to throw to splash her, and quick as I do she jumps up and grabs one of her own. It's bigger, the size of a yeast tin, and she can throw farther. I chuck mine halfway and make a cannonball splash with a waterspout. She hucks hers all the way across, so I have to backpedal up the bank or get splashed.

"I'll give you everything you've got coming," she says. Duke is not on my side in this. I hate Charlemagne.

"I bet you killed your husband," I say.

"Probably," she says.

"You should be in jail."

"Mmhmm," she says. She sits back down in the weeds.

"I'll bet there's a reward," I say. "I'll bet the FBI is looking for you." She's made us bring her the papers before to see if anybody cared she was gone. Now she sticks her fingers in her ears and just stares at me.

When the afternoon is gone, Charlemagne says, "Duke's hungry." It's been hot enough to dry my pants, hot enough to turn Charlemagne's legs pink where they've stuck out under her dress.

"Yeah, come on, Ray," Duke says. He's been dinking around the creek, whistling on grass and bombing water skeeters. He's got his tennis shoes wet and dirty from slipping in.

"How are you going to get back across now you're dry, Ray?" Charlemagne says.

I look at her, then I climb the bank and walk over across the bridge. Duke's put the chain back on my bike.

On the road, Charlemagne fits herself in between my handlebars. "Am I too heavy?" she says.

"I can't see," I say.

"I'll tell you where to steer," she says. "Go slow. Watch for cars." She rides with her feet sticking out, one hand holding her dress between her knees. We pump home and no cars pass and honk.

• • •

At Duke's today, his Ma has swatted him with a wooden spoon across his ear.

"Come here," she says. Duke's taken money out of her purse, the black one with the scraggly rabbit-fur trim. Mostly she doesn't miss it when it's the nickels and the pennies, but she's caught him now with a dollar in his fist.

"Hold him," she's screaming. "Get up and catch him." There's a man she's talking to who's lying naked on the bed I can see from the door of the back room. He's resting against the white vinyl headboard, and the yellow blinds are pulled down now in the daytime like it's a sickroom. He pulls a pillow across his privates and motions for me to shut the door.

It's a trailer, Duke's house, not very big, and Duke's Ma has got herself between him and the door. Her braid's swinging like a cow's tail. She's holding her housecoat closed while she goes for Duke with the spoon one-handed. Duke's covered up like a boxer. He catches a swat across the knuckles, and he howls again, but he won't open the fist to give up the dollar.

"Lying," Duke's Ma is yelling, "stealing," swinging with the spoon, most of the time wide while Duke's still got room to move side to side. "Come here," she says, "come here."

The man from the bedroom comes out in his jeans. "Get out," he says to me, and he shoves me at the door with his foot.

I'm outside down the wooden steps, and I can hear Duke's Ma saying, "Get him," and I see the man through the window go for Duke. Then Duke is thrown down the steps and the door slams. He's crying and calling his Ma a name. He gives her both fingers, hard, swinging his arms up like he's starting the music. Then we climb on our bikes. Duke's still got the dollar.

We spend it on Wacky Package stickers, like Duke's plastered all over his bike, that come with wide sticks of chalky pink gum. This time Duke's got "Uncle Bum's Convicted Rice, preferred by panhandlers, freeloaders and hobos in jail" with a cop and a bum on the box, and a "Stingline 45 caliber staple gun." I get "Flysol Spray" for germs to use and "Oscar Moron Bacon" that comes from stupid pigs.

We have stacks we take with us at night to show Charlemagne in the little fort we've built for her in the loft. We bring a flashlight to see better.

"My little brother collected baseball cards," she says. "What are these?"

"Look at this one," Duke says. It's the "Ragedy Ant" doll for baby insects, the one that will bug you.

"Yuck," Charlemagne says.

At the end of the summer we brought scissors and Charlemagne cut her hair short. She wears a bandanna around her neck like a bandit now and sneezes from the dry dust of the hay. She pokes around the rafters with the flashlight after we finish with the stickers, looking for old bird's nests.

"What do you two do all day?" she says. "Who do you play with? Do you have girlfriends?" She's seen the red welt on Duke's ear and asked him how he got it.

I tell her Duke's girlfriend is Elise Pommery, and he shoves me and tells me to shut up.

Charlemagne is calling for the kitten Duke and I stole for her when Gran made Uncle Waddle drown the others in a bucket. She leans back over her heels now and scoops the gray kitty up under its belly. "Come here, love," she says. "Come be Duke's girlfriend."

"Do you know how to kiss?" she says to me. I shake my head. Duke's watching to see if she's going to show me. She walks to me on her knees. It's cool at nights now, and she has on two dresses, one buttoned over the top of the other. She says, "You have to close your eyes." I do, and Charlemagne kisses my lips with a loud pop.

"Just like that," she says. Then she sits down on a blanket in the hay. "It's important to know."

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Duke's Ma has gone off somewhere since the first of the month and locked the trailer door. I can get in through a little window in the bathroom. I let Duke in the front door, and we poke around the place like robbers.

Gran always used to tell Duke before he could stay over, "You call your mother. She's a Christian woman." Duke would dial the phone and sit on the stool in the kitchen and pretend to be talking. Now we set another place and Gran just says when he's up at the table, "You're a good eater. You're a good boy."

Gran cooks every time for ten people, even with her sons gone and the wives, too, that sometimes lived here when the sons were out of work. And sometimes it was the sons and not the wives, when the sons were gone off on drunks or kicked out of the house for something. She boils a dozen huge potatoes and makes two quarts of brown gravy, and there's a roast the size of a birthday cake. She sits at the head of the table and tells us to finish what's on our plates, piling more on her own in a big mess that she never eats.

Duke and Uncle Waddle have both dished up double helpings. They watch each other's plates across the table and horse around and spear chunks of each other's food when one isn't looking.

In two weeks is Halloween. Uncle Waddle wants to know what we're going to school as. "Be a hobo," he says. "That's easy."

It's what Duke and I do every year. We each wear one of Uncle Waddle's flannel undershirts with a pillow stuffed underneath. We black-in beards with shoe polish and carry gunnysacks for our loot.

Gran's mashing up her food, thinking of something else.

"Ma," Uncle Waddle says, "I'll have to do up the place." Every year he likes to build something on the porch, a car accident or at least a leg sticking out of the big post box that he can wiggle with a string. "Maybe I could do the headless hobo."

"Hush up," Gran says. "Eat."

Tonight the sky is trying for an early snow. It falls in slivers, but nothing sticks on the ground. The air is full of glass. Duke and I take food from dinner to the barn for Charlemagne, potatoes and bread and meat. We climb to the loft in the dark and call for her.

"She's not here," Duke says. He fishes a piece of bread out of her plate, and we sit down in the hay to wait. Sometimes she goes for a day or two, but she leaves us a note and she always comes back.

"She'll have to find a house or go somewhere where it's warm for the winter," I say to Duke. It's cold in the barn tonight. I've got Charlemagne's horse blanket pulled up around my head.

"Maybe she can live with you and Gran," Duke says.

"I don't know," I say. There are empty rooms in the house. Gran and Uncle Waddle have one apiece; Duke and I share. "Maybe if your Ma doesn't come back, she could live in the trailer."

"Maybe," Duke says. We sit in the dark, not talking anymore until Duke crawls over to open the window and looks out where the sky is still working to snow. "She's out there," he says, "by the grave." And I hope it's her, the long shadow in the light of the screen and the low clouds.

Charlemagne is covered up with dry leaves when we get there, sitting just under the trees against the headstone. "Stop," she says. On the little TV the Vice President is shaking hands with Gran and then with Gramps and Uncle Waddle. "How do you know it's me? Maybe I'm a ghost."

"You don't look like one," I say.

"What do I look like?" she says.

"You," I say. "Charlemagne."

She nods. "Nothing I can do about that."

The guns are going off for the salute, and the funeral is going to start. At the church where they have the funeral there is a woman with a baby. She has on a blue dress with white knots tied all over on it and a square hat. Her hair is dust-colored, like mine, and she is so skinny her arms look barely bigger than the baby's. I used to think this was my mother.

"It's cold," I say.

"Heaven is hard," Charlemagne says, "very hard. Did you know that?"

"We could build a fire," I say.

Charlemagne moves from under her leaves while Duke and I gather up sticks and the driest twigs you find at the end of branches. We build a little tepee, and Duke lights the match first try.

"Did you see Uncle Bob?" I say. Charlemagne sits down again with her back against the stone and her feet almost in the fire. She's got a ratty gray sweater, one that was Gran's, stretched over her knees, and her kitten is squirming around underneath it. Duke's scrunched up by the flames.

"What did he say?" Duke wants to know.

Charlemagne shrugs. She has leaves in her hair and on her sweater. She picks them off so they won't catch fire.

"Do you know he was twenty-two when he died?" she says.

I shake my head no.

"I'm twenty-two," she says. She dumps a handful of leaves on the fire and they smoke and float up in embers like paper. "You were born. You were almost two years old, still a baby."

"I don't remember," I say.

"Do you know what happened?" she says. "Do you know how the Vietnamese had learned to shoot down airplanes by shooting in front of them? He knew about that, and he thought it was just a story. He thought he had better luck, anyway.

"He was too brave," she says. She reaches out a hand to lay on the stone. "That's what you were, Bob McCrackin." The war will be on next, the rockets coming out of the jungle. While her big shadow waves on the trees and while Duke and I bounce on our toes around the fire, she tells us about it.

"Boys are too brave," she says.

I am not brave now. I am cold. Duke is beating his hands up and down like wings in the pockets of his coat, and the flames are dying.

"We need more wood," I say.

"We can go," Charlemagne says. "Here." She hands Duke her kitten to put in his pocket, and we stomp out the fire.

"Where are you going to go for the winter?" I say.

"I don't know," Charlemagne says. "Where's a good place? Arizona?" She takes our hands and we walk, crunching the hay stubble in the field. She wears the rubber muck boots we've got her from the house and brown cotton jersey gloves.

"You're going to grow up wild animals," she says. "You're going to be out of control."

"You could stay," I tell here. I don't know where, but we could find someplace. "Or we could go with you."

"We could do that," she says. And while Duke and I make plans, behind us the snowfall covers our tracks.

Kokopelli

In Albuquerque I have given my ragged body over to the care of a bossy, spindle-limbed white woman and a sour peasant who goes by the unlikely name of Robert Hombre. Now Sarah Hickman, the woman (whom I and everyone I know have always called Hickey), tells me she's made an appointment for me with an herbalist who's going to diagnose my ailments by looking into my eyes and tapping on my feet.

"He squeezes around until he finds the spots that make you scream, and those correspond with the impurities in your organs," Hickey says.

"He sounds like a witch doctor."

"He's got a degree."

"Is he expensive?"

"What choices do you have?" Hickey says while she purees cabbage and celery in a buzzing juicer, searching out the elixir of life.

It's Hickey who has brought me to the high deserts of New Mexico from Palo Alto. She made all the arrangements, drove out to pick me up, cried when she saw me. She covered up her mouth like she was going to cough, but it was in her eyes.

"You scared me," she confessed later. "Your hands coming out from under that sweater looked like chicken feet, all dried up skin and bones."

The doctors do not know what's wrong.

"It isn't cancer," they've said. "We know that much."

So don't worry.

"It's got to be a virus, but we just can't isolate it."

I've been on feroxone, amoxicillin, NutraSweet, laxatives. Now the doctors are back to suspecting cancer, and I'm in New Mexico taking the cure, the dry climate and what is supposed to be a mild winter.

Hickey has been my friend for eleven years. She was my graduate student for two of them at Stanford. Later, when her only brother died—all the family she had left, and whom she loved—I helped her come out to California for her breakdown. I paid for her flight out. I drove her to the beach and let her sit and listen to the surf, or walked with her while she talked through the childhood she had spent with her brother, rambling as though she were thumbing through a photo album, a picture and a year at a time until she worked her way up to his aneurysm.

"He could have been shot, for all anybody knew. He just dropped right there on the sidewalk like Geppetto had cut all the strings," she said.

When she called to say she was coming for me, she did her best to explain that this wasn't just payback time.

"I want your help," she said, though she's never explained for what, "and you could use mine."

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Hickey has taken to dressing Western in New Mexico. She wears cowboy boots, rounds out the back pockets of her jeans with a little extra hip and bottom. She has long legs, a long body. She's a quarter Cherokee, ties her hair back in a bandanna and looks like a barrel racer. She bought a jeep when she moved out to New Mexico after she finished at Brown in women's and ethnic studies. Came back to reclaim her Western heritage, she said, though I can't recall if the Cherokee ever came to Albuquerque, and I think she was born in Washington.

Her ranch house is all open beams and ceramic-tiled floors, with Mexican horse blankets for throw rugs and wall hangings. Long hallways. Rustic pottery the color of lavender sandstone on the tables and potted cacti on the windowsills.

"Do you need a wheelchair, Chick?" Hickey said while we made the drive from California at my pace, five hours at a time. "There's a lot of ground to cover in the house."

"Maybe you can train a dog to pull me around in a cart," I said. I was sour and moody from the ride and the relentless fatigue.

"I've got a goat," Hickey said, "and a little red wagon."

She stopped just outside of Albuquerque to make a phone call, and Robert Hombre was parked in her drive in his rotted blue pickup when we got there, waiting to help me into the house. Hickey swears that day, with Robert's shoulder under my arm and his left hand wrapped in my belt, I was surrounded by the sound of wings, and Robert thought my spirit would fly before they got me stretched out on the stiff sheets Hickey had turned back on a hard, four-poster bed in her guest room.

"He reached up once to push your mouth closed," she told me later, to keep my soul from screaming out of its own accord and in its own hurry.

I know I was tired, and I recall the smell of rain in those sheets and the scoured purity in their stiffness. I woke up late the next day and found Hickey had a baby monitor rigged up in the room so she could hear me all over the house.

"You don't talk in your sleep, Chick," she said. "You sure snore, though."

The dry soles of my feet shushed like sandpaper as I shuffled over the kitchen tile to lower myself down at her table.

"I've got class early Tuesdays and Thursdays. I'm going to work here in the mornings for the rest of the week. So." Hickey stood at the cooking island in the middle of her kitchen slapping her palm on top of a fist.

"So what?"

"What do you need in the mornings? What kind of routine do we need to set up?"

"I've got routine," I said. "That's all I've got."

"I'll get breakfast for you if you want," she said, "or leave it on the table. Do you need any help in the bathroom?"

"No," I said. "Not. Negative."

"Be as difficult as you want, Chick," she said while she bent over to look in the refrigerator. "I'm going to be a saint."

"I'm a sick old man," I said. "I'm entitled to obstinate self-reliance. It's a measure of my dignity." Hickey stood up with an armful of yogurt, cottage cheese, and cantaloupe stacked under her chin.

"You're a thirty-nine-year-old bachelor who's afraid he's dying and pissed because he's probably still a virgin," she said. I glared while Hickey bounced a yogurt carton off a slender bicep and caught it in her hand. Her kitchen was on the northeast side of the house and bright with sunlight in the mornings.

I looked out her windows at the ragged mountains to the east, the Sandias, Hickey had told me. "When I become incontinent or my mind starts to go, you can keep me on a chain out back," I said.

"Chick," she said, turning to me casually while she sliced a melon, "you are not going to die in my house."

"Then you shouldn't have brought me here, dearheart," I said.

"When was the last time you left your apartment before I came and got you?"

"I went to the doctor's twice a week."

"When was the last time you cleaned it? Or called anybody? Or ordered in groceries? When was the last time you took any of your medication besides pain pills?" Hickey came to the table with a plate. "Eat."

"You aren't going to threaten to force-feed me?"

"If it comes to that. You could just say thank you like a human being," she said. "Tomorrow if you're up past eight, you're on you're own."

"This was your idea," I reminded her.

"I know it," she said. "So I have to be tolerant."

"You don't have to be anything," I told her. Hickey was bent over a student's paper and a plate of toast across the kitchen. The potted cactus in the window heard. She probably didn't.

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Some power has bewitched the good people of New Mexico. It has turned their eyes blind to the faded desert, to the badlands, to the cold nights and the seasons with no water. The natives are under heavy spell, and they have writ "Land of Enchantment" on their license plates, under what might be the Hopi symbol for pickup truck or no luck.

"That's the sign for the sun, the four points of the compass, the wheel of life," Hickey tells me. "Lots of things."

The wheel of life greets me every morning on an orange and white stick-up magnet from a local market that's pasted on the fridge.

On the worst days, I lean on a cane to get around. I suffer from general enervation for at least half my waking hours, a dull tingle, a hum in the nerves below my hips like the flicker of a fluorescent tube. I can lie in bed in the morning after Hickey's gone and hear my heart panic. I don't know where the blood goes; my feet and hands are icy, or they sweat like frying bacon.

Hickey tells me that I don't really want to die now. Hickey knows this, she claims, because along with a study of philosophy she has been in one short marriage, four or five bad love affairs, the Peace Corps, and volunteered half of what time she had left to women's crisis centers. All of this has left her in closer touch with the human condition than I've been, genuflecting in the dusty halls of academic rigor since I was seventeen, even if I do put on a team sweatshirt and watch the Cardinal play on Saturdays, or did.

It's an old, tired argument about academics not knowing the real pains of the human heart or hunger as something visceral. And it's not true. I have been moved by weather. Religious mystery has brought sudden tears to my eyes, and I've considered the offers of female students after we've all played dumb and let indiscretion slide. I am

not insensible or unacquainted with love or the throes of mighty passion.

I have been too busy, though. And I haven't been passionately in love.

So go the processes of mighty reason these days.

To keep myself in the habit, or because I am looking for something I don't want to admit, around ten o'clock I sit myself down at Hickey's kitchen table with a fat stack of books and letters and a spiral notebook. I've been reconstructing the life of my great-great-grandfather lately, who from all accounts was and did nothing, except he lived seventy years, married, begat nine children, and raised sheep, which is to say he interacted with at least two people—his wife and whoever bought the sheep—and he ought to have left some mark on the world.

All my good intentions last till about noon, sometimes eleven-thirty.

Today I'm going to have an excuse to quit because Robert Hombre is rapping on the window. He hits it with the flat of his hand, but he wears a ring which taps against the glass with the sound of sleet. If no one is home, he will let himself in. If I am here, he will rap, then be standing at the door with his hat in his hands when I open it.

"Robert," I say, sweeping my arm back behind me, "welcome." I appreciate his sullen quiet.

"You all right today, Mr. Putnam?" he says.

"I'm fine," I say.

Robert is just standing, as though Hickey's left a dollar for him in the sugar bowl I'm supposed to know about or he's collecting for the newspaper. Hickey is gentle with his dour moods. I've grown tired of angry young men over the years. But this morning I find I don't want him to go. I want company.

"Is it warm out?"

Robert looks over his shoulder at the sun and shrugs.

"You want a drink?" I say. There's no point in waiting for an answer, so I head for the fridge, where the only things Hickey has stocked are a gallon of skim milk and a half-finished twelve-pack of Diet Pepsi. I

gather up two cans, then walk straight toward Robert, so he'll have to step out of the way, and sit on Hickey's ceramic-tile step.

"Where are you from, Robert?" I say. He's standing behind me, casting a shadow I can see off to my side. The sun has warmed the steps like a griddle.

"Taos," he says. "El Paso. Gallup."

"I'm from Kansas City and Cody, Wyoming. Don't ask me how that works," I say. "Did Hickey tell you to keep an eye on me?"

Robert sets his half-empty can down on the porch behind me.

"I got to do the corral," he says.

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Within a week of my being here, Hickey has taken to leaving a prepared lunch in the fridge to encourage my eating, and Philip the homeopath comes over and has me lie on a collapsible table while he searches out pressure points in my feet that correspond to my vitals and health. This hurts worse than anything the doctors have done. He is surprised at how often I wince and holler.

"There, too?" he says.

"Yes," I say, gasping and wondering if he'd stop if I cry and beg. I am crippled after what he has done, I'm certain.

Philip is puzzled.

"It's in the stomach," he says. "In the heart, the blood, lungs."

"So take me out and shoot me," I say.

He nods, as though this is advice he is considering.

"So what's wrong, Doc?" I say. I feel my feet at the end of the table, bare, growing cold.

"I don't know," he says.

"Don't feel too bad. Nobody does," I tell him. He's not going to help me up, so I help myself—over onto one elbow, half-mast, twisting my legs over the side of the table, keeping my center of gravity far enough back that I don't fall over the edge.

"There are some things we can try," he says. Through the doorway into the next room, I can see Robert Hombre's leg that he's crossed over the other, swinging like he's warming up to punt.

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"It hurt," is the report I give to Hickey. "He could've just beat on me with a piece of bamboo."

"It wasn't that bad," she says.

"Robert probably sat in the other room and laughed. *Hombre,* what kind of name is that?"

"One he took for himself," Hickey says, stretching over until I can see the line of tan between the flannel shirt she has on over her jogging bra and her stretch pants. I'm getting envious of Hickey's body doing deep bends to the front and side.

"What's his story?"

"He's a lost soul. His father was an alcoholic until he died last year. His mother he never knew. His grandfather was something of a medicine man, but he was old and wasn't interested—he's dead, too. He feels a little detached."

I'm feeling a little something myself, watching from the window as Hickey heads down the dusty road in a long-legged trot. Self-pity isn't an altogether useless emotion. It's something to allow yourself when there's nobody else around, an indulgence, a reward for a day's fronted pleasantness. Nobody at Stanford had any idea how sick I was until I took medical leave beginning after Christmas. They all had various prescriptions for what was immediately diagnosed as a mild case of doldrums. Apply for a Fulbright or take a class on semester abroad. Get a weight training program or a wife. Nobody lacked concern, but I didn't have a friend out there after eleven years I could be honest with. Nobody who, when they sat down and asked, "Chick, what's wrong?" I could give a real answer to.

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When Robert takes me into town to fill Philip's long shopping list, I try three times on the way down to start conversation. He waits in the truck until I come out with an armful of paper sacks that smell of trail dust and chilies. Because he has made me angry, I am going to talk to Robert Hombre all the way home, whether he answers me or not.

"Look," I say. I pull out a handful of empty capsules. "Eternal life."

I produce a half-pound plastic bag. "Cayenne pepper. Twice a day. Opens up the lungs, warms the stomach, burns out impurities. Probably useful as Catholic penance. Rosehips." I give Robert a knowing waggle of the eyebrows. "Ginger. Good for nausea. Garlic, for the heart and all troublesome undead."

"Here's rosemary," I say, stirring around in my sack, "here's pansies, here's rue. And this," I hold up a brittle plastic bottle, "this stands at the pinnacle of modern medical science and is a product of the best pharmaceutical labs, not being made of friendly native plants and herbs, but of science and alchemy and measured handfuls of the world's alkalis and poisons. Percodan, because what Philip don't know probably hurts me like the fires of hell. Not that you probably even understand English."

Robert looks over at me through his narrow eyes for longer than makes me comfortable when he's supposed to be driving, then turns back to the road.

"What would Indian medicine do for me?" I say to be conciliatory.

Robert shakes his head. "Fill your room with the smoke of burning goat shit and sprinkle corn in your sheets. Keep you up all night chanting and rattling gourds at the bad spirits until you get a headache and you aren't afraid to die anymore."

"Might be worth something," I say. "What do you think?"

"Some of the people's things are old things," he says. "Older than your Jesus."

"My Jesus has been around a long time," I explain. I've been giving my boyhood faith another try in New Mexico. I've even made Hickey take me to church once. "He made this world. He saved it. He came to your people, came to my people. My Jesus has been very busy."

"Maybe that's why he's not hearing you."

"Because I'm still sick?"

"Maybe he doesn't like that medicine," Robert says, tipping his head toward the bag. "Maybe he wouldn't like Indian medicine."

Two nights ago Robert stood in the doorway while two elders my church sent over dripped oil on my head and laid on hands and prayed over me. It was a ritual full of warm feeling and age, performed with a power older than this earth, and Robert was sensitive enough to take off his hat. The blessing was inconclusive. The pain lessened, as they promised, but there was no word from heaven on life or death.

"Do you think New Mexico is good medicine?" I say.

Robert spits out the window. "I'll bring you something," he says.

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When I confront Hickey later, she confesses that she is teaching Robert Hombre how to read. When I ask how she found him, she tells me that he came with the house.

When she asks if I am jealous, I tell her no. "We had a good talk today. I figured you two were just having a little fling, but he makes a good postgraduate project."

"He's a person."

"And conveniently nonwhite," I say.

"I didn't know it mattered to you."

"It doesn't."

"Well what did you mean, then?" she says.

"You're the doctor. You're the earth woman, the holy mother." I spread my arms wide for dramatic effect. "Old Hombre can suckle up to a breast there and nurse away at the font of all cultural diversity and enlightened tolerance while you empathize. 'The white man has done to you only what he has done to all of us. Come, my brother, and let us venerate your texts of castration.'" I guess I am expecting her to laugh.

"You can go to hell," Hickey says. There are tears in her eyes, but she won't stay and fight with me. She throws a leather rucksack full of books over one shoulder and bangs out the front door. I hear her jeep grip for traction and then just the tick of a clock in the hallway.

Hickey is upset because I have questioned her motives, as if everything she has done for me doesn't prove she has a heart. I don't know why I'm upset. As penance I spend the evening with one of Hickey's

tomes on Native Americana and drafting a clever note of apology, which I finally scrap in favor of writing "I'm sorry" on an old grocery receipt that I drop on Hickey's pillow before I struggle off to bed.

Hickey lives far enough outside of town that there is only one light to see in the distance, looking like a landed star from the back of her house. She tells me it's a shed, almost a mile away, with a chain and a lock on the door. The light shines over the door day and night. "I like having it out there," Hickey's told me. She rolls over in bed and looks at it when she wakes up from bad dreams, and she doesn't feel alone. I don't see how that can be when she knows it's just a shed where no one goes. But from here, you don't know that. It's a point to reach. It's a neighbor. It's death out there, friendly from a distance, a mystery on the outside.

Despite what Hickey wants, or what I want, I cannot believe most days in getting well. My condition isn't agonizing most of the time, but it is like living with a heavy flu, and nothing is improving. I have all the lethargy of age without the years, and I am steady and wholesome as a rotted post. When I think of living this way, the days stretch out dry and empty as the New Mexico landscape, flat as my own past.

Yet I cannot come to grips with dying.

Hickey still refuses to listen to any talk of it. She won't allow it. "You could heal yourself with the powers of your brain alone. You've got the fountain of youth locked up in there. You've got every cure you could ever need. You're indestructible," she preaches to me.

Hickey is more afraid of dying than I am.

• • •

I am amazed this afternoon. I am sitting behind Hickey's house in the cab of Robert's truck where it is warm and stuffy, licking at my upper lip. My sweat has no taste of salt. I roll down the window to tell this to Hickey as she walks up.

"Hmm," she says. She lays a hand across my forehead, checking for fever.

"Maybe I've depleted all my vital minerals. Maybe I need one of those sports drinks." I babble while I let her help me out of the truck

and we work our way up the walk lined with cactus and yucca spines and yellow soil.

After dinner Hickey brews up a tea she says will be good for me made from dried roots, twigs, feathers and animal bones, for all I know. She gathers up brown sugar and skim milk and trundles a little tea service into her den on a wooden tray. While we drink her sour water, Hickey talks about a problem student, whether to buy a horse of her own from the money she makes stabling other people's, our common past.

"Do you ever hear from Mark?" I say just because suddenly I have thought of his name. There was a time when you couldn't mention Hickey's ex-husband. Now it's just something she's not interested in.

"I don't even know where he's living," she says. She stirs in the fire that is more for my benefit than necessity, then yawns and blinks her eyes before she asks if I miss Stanford.

"I was getting stale even before this came on. Same old story."

"You were the hottest thing going when I was there," Hickey says. "But you had more hair."

"Success isn't good for the young."

"Bull."

"I think maybe I should quit."

"And do what?" Hickey yawns again, waving her hands in front of her face like she's shooing flies.

"Sleepy?" I ask her. The room is warm and has a dreamy, drugged feel. On the floor, Hickey bends over double like a paper clip until her head is lying on her crossed arms, which are on her knees, and she is looking up at me from under her flopped-forward hair.

"Is anything helping?" she says. "The cayenne, whatever that awful smelling stuff is Robert gave you?"

"Sure," I say. Then, "I don't know. It makes my sweat stink and my piss burn. I'm not sleeping any more or less."

"Chick," she says, "why don't you get better?" The room is dim now with the fire burnt down. Hickey's smiling up at me, a smile that is tolerant, like she is a mother and I am a child playing a game she can see is silly and that I am too old for. She can't understand why the child

still wants to play, why he doesn't grow up, but she is patient. There are tears in her eyes.

"I've been thinking about that," I say.

"Just like a scholar. Why don't you do something about it?"

What I find myself thinking right now is that I am feeling a certain yearning toward Sarah Hickman.

It's the second oldest path to immortality. Posterity, seed, the perpetuation of a bloodline and a name that somehow links the present with generations of ancestors who were farmers and blacksmiths, peasants, rogues, dustmen. Men and women behaving like men and women and having children.

I look up at her over my teacup until suddenly she unwinds herself and announces that it is time for bed.

"It's too early," I say. It's not, and there's nothing I look forward to more, but that's why I fight it.

Hickey jumps up and pulls me to my feet with both hands. She turns me in a serious tango clinch and slides me down the hall sideways, our arms pointing like the prow of a ship. She leads me into my room and lets me down on the side of the mattress.

"I feel like an old man," I say.

"You can say that for now, but tomorrow we really start things my way. Complete change of diet—no more cheating. Exercise. Healthy thinking. No more of these," she says, scooping the pain pills off my bedside table. I am sitting with my hands on my knees, still flushed from our sashay down the hallway, entranced as she bends toward my face. Hickey has narrow, brown eyes, clear and exactly the color of almonds.

"What do you think?" she wants to know.

It's exactly the question I am not prepared to answer.

• • •

I mull over the idea of marriage through the next week, sitting in Robert's truck to get the sun into my bones while he is out patching the metal roof on Hickey's shed. It seems like a young and lively thing

to do, and what romance I don't feel I should be able to quote. I have read all the masters.

I ought to consider what reservations she might have. It wouldn't be fair, perhaps, to ask her to make such a short-term investment, but I find myself more concerned with what we might do if I lived.

I certainly don't know if it would be fair to ask her to have children.

Or maybe Hickey's right in one of her theories; maybe I only want to steal some of her life force. Hickey's postulated that the dying—though this was in no way meant to include me—don't want to die alone because they believe that with the living around, they won't. They'll be able to maintain some hold on life by clinging to a little bit of somebody else's. Her conclusion is that the sick should not be left alone in hospitals with only other sick people around, the old not abandoned in rest homes, that the key to eternal life lies in community.

Still, there is something to this—redemption in becoming a groom at forty—and for a couple of days I follow Hickey around while she's doing housework, grinning like a cornered bandit.

Hickey herself has stripped the cupboards of any trace of processing or preservatives. Everything we eat is fresh and steamed or raw for a minimal loss of vitamins. She's boxed up the microwave, thrown the aluminum pots out, and bought a water treatment center for the kitchen tap. She is going to feed me back to health with life straight from the earth. We go on nature walks now in the late afternoons when she is home early enough.

"Are you up to a little outing?" Hickey wants to know while we are kicking up the drive in front of the house, with the sun easing down behind us in a slow melt. I've been complaining less, and she has taken this as a sign of mending health. What I am doing is trying to relent. I've discovered that that great-great-grandfather of mine lost a leg at fifty and still sired another child and didn't die until he was seventy-two.

"Where?" I say. "The Whole Life Expo in Santa Fe?"

"Chaco Canyon," she tells me, digging in her coat pocket for her house key. "We'll borrow Janie's camper. They've got four or five kinds of pueblo architecture there, and you could use a change of air."

"Five kinds?" I whistle.

"Shut up," Hickey tells me while she heads around the house, "and wait here for a minute."

"Why?"

"Because I don't have a key," she yells from around the corner, "and I don't want you watching while I have to crawl in a window."

Before I reach the corner of the house, Hickey is standing out of breath with the front door open.

"Too late," she says.

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What I find at Chaco is the enchantment New Mexico has advertised on its license plate. I am aware of the ghosts as I hobble through the ruins of Pueblo Bonito, the beautiful village, and listen to Robert's stories. He is in a trance, more civil and loquacious than I have ever seen him. He lets on the whole day that he knows the secrets of Chaco Canyon. Who these people were, why they left. Hickey divides the afternoon between trying to pry the truth out of him and then backing off, her heart in ethical conflict between the scholar's curiosity and reverence for the sacred—and only half believing that Robert knows anything at all.

The ruins here are built on an open plain against slickrock cliffs with slab faces that look to have been sculpted with a butter knife. The talus below, once shored up by loose stone and feathered prayer sticks, is made up of smooth boulders the size of modern kitchens. The ruins are the apartments, pantries, and churches of a people who were part of a massive network flung maybe as far as Texas, Arizona, Colorado. This was the center place, the hub of an ancient society's wheel, and modern diggers have found bracelets of tiny stacked seashells here amongst rooms a thousand miles from the ocean. No water runs here now, and I ask Robert if some rain or river god grew angry and abandoned this place, leaving the people's corn to turn to stone.

Sitting next to a low doorway, against a wall of rubble and mud, I watch Hickey and Robert circling one of the small, shallow kivas. I find myself strangely easy and at home here among the ancient and the dead. Wrap me in a woolen blanket and I could be a prop, my legs given out underneath me, my hair gone gray.

Judging from the warmth I am taking from the sun and how this little corner is out of the wind, it is my guess that old men sat here in the afternoons for more than four hundred years, watching their grandchildren, overseeing preparations for the kiva, in confident conversation with the Great Spirit about the younger generation or the state of the fields or their son-in-law's noisy lovemaking. And dozing, which is when they saw their greatest visions and from whence came tribal stories of eagle, coyote, puma, the first tales of flight, and the sweetest songs of pleasure drawn from memory, and the oldest rhymes of heaven. Wisdom to the young is the common sense of old men and tired women who have made babies and crops and seen the same sun rise and fall one day so much like the next that they can let the night come on with confidence of morning.

At the visitors center Hickey buys slides and we learn of the four increasingly sophisticated methods of pueblo construction, and the story of the humpbacked flute player who in this neck of the woods went by the name Kokopelli. He is a stick figure painted on a rock here, with wild hair and one leg bent in a shuffling dance, a stick flute to his lips, his back curved like the shell of an egg. He is omnipresent in the Southwest and has been spotted from Canada to South America. He brought the clouds. Sometimes he had seeds in the hump on his back, sometimes songs, rain, magic. He brought prosperity, news, good tidings.

"He was a messenger. The Zunis called him the rain priest," Robert Hombre says. "For the Hopis he was a go-between with God. His music made it warm enough for the plants to grow, made people friends. Strong medicine."

"He's phallic, of course," Hickey points out. "For fertility."

Robert shrugs.

We finish our tour late in the afternoon at the great kiva, Casa Riconada. It is a deep stone colosseum, full of quiet and reverence. Robert says nothing here. We enter on the south through a stone doorway the shape of a headless cross and look across the wide floor to another doorway opposite with the same T shape, which has two crumbling square rooms behind it. Wind stirs the sand. A low bench runs along the wall, and the floor is pocked here and there with raised piles of stones in squares and circles like garden plots, vaults that once held pillars, maybe something else. The stone could once have been yellow or red; now it is the washed-out, pale blondes and browns of the cliffs. Hickey stands in respectful silence. I am undone with the echoes of a thousand voices.

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"Chick, I don't know how we're going to keep you warm." Hickey is strapped with genuine worry. She fusses over me as if she were dressing a second grader for a winter walk to school. I tell her I am fine, but under the large poncho and the medicine blanket I can feel the chill like a second spirit, outside my body. Hickey has brought handwarmers—plastic bags you crush to start a chemical reaction that generates heat. She rolls one in her palms, then reaches in my shirt to lay it on my chest, where it burns and sends skinny fingers of heat trickling down my veins.

We sit very still in the late twilight, tucked into the corner of one of the back rooms of the great kiva, Casa Riconada. Robert has his feet drawn up under his poncho and the flat brim of his hat pulled down to eye level, in what has become a classic Indian pose. Hickey is uncomfortable sitting, but makes do with minimal shifting and no complaints. We are waiting until we think it might be safe to speak, after all good rangers have gone to bed. I have given up trying to hold myself together. I sit against the wall, splayed out, and I can feel everything in my body shifting and rolling, turning to fluid. Hickey passes me another heat pack, and it is the only spot in my body that glows or has any fire.

What there is to do is look at the stars. Mine is a culture that does not watch the skies anymore, and as I look at them now, the art of celestial navigation strikes me as a stupendous mystery. It makes sense, in a way, to know where you are based on your relationship to heaven, but it requires steady gazing, watching like I don't think has been done in years. You can know the seasons by the stars and the skies. I had an astrologer once describe to me a woman I knew, whom she said I would marry, and then a terrible misfortune that loomed in my future like Jonah's whale—she said it might be that I would lose all my money.

"Robert," I say. Hickey starts at the sound of my voice and looks around to see if it is safe. "What do the people say about the stars?"

"They were great sailors once," he says, meaning, I believe, the Indians and not the stars. He takes my speaking as a sign to stretch and look my way.

"My father read me a story about the two brothers who take care of the sky," I say. "Every night they come and screw the stars in like light bulbs, and then in the morning they take them out again. That's why they don't come on all at once, and some of them don't get twisted in tight, and so they blink and twinkle."

"That's as good as anything I've heard," Robert says.

"It's modern myth," Hickey cuts in. "It just doesn't serve the sacred purpose."

"Sure it does," I say. "Those two brothers explain lots of things."

Hickey is indulgent with her smiles. "How are you doing, Chick?" she says.

Robert watches while I answer. He does not want to carry me out of here. I am going to say fine, but instead I say I'm restless. "Did the people stay here and die, or did they leave?" I ask Robert.

Robert rolls his shoulders, which might be a shrug or a sign of discomfort. "They died somewhere," he says.

"They left," Hickey says coldly.

Robert nods. "Most of them."

"Where did they go?"

"Where there was water. Another valley. I don't know," Robert admits.

"But they left," Hickey says again. "When they couldn't live here anymore, they got out and found a new place."

Robert shrugs again, and that ends it.

After Robert dozes, Hickey comes over to me of her own accord. She tucks my blankets around me, then crawls under one side and wraps one of my arms around her shoulder.

"You're cold, Chick," she mutters, and she rubs her hands up my chest and back, down my legs. "This was stupid." I've got a cap she's tugged down on my head, and she pulls down earflaps and snugs the whole thing tight against my skull.

"It's something, isn't it?" I say, looking out at the night and the stone walls.

"It's crazy."

"Well give me credit for that, then. I'm doing something rash and impetuous. Something lively."

"I give you credit for that," Hickey says.

When she sleeps, with her head in my lap and an arm across my legs, I am alone.

For six months all I have been able to do is sleep, but tonight I can't. The moon would give us away to any ranger who was looking. I have learned the Hopi word for moon. I have learned its sign which I can make with my hands and a symbol I can trace in the sand. This moon is white, the color of bone. The story of the two brothers in the sky said nothing about the moon, and I suppose it is there for them to wonder and make up stories about.

The wind is stirring Hickey's hair, and if we had a fire, the flames would be whipping with the dull sound of flapping sheets.

A thousand years ago, six thousand years ago, there was a night like this. I feel it now, that I know that night, that I have been there, like I am here now. A night waiting for the humpbacked man and the sound

of the flute in the wind, or the bark of a coyote, waiting for news of a baby being born, the song of the ages.

I get up now, careful to roll a jacket to tuck under Hickey's head. I shuffle to the cross and stand in the doorway, facing another mirroring it from across the wide circle. Before my eyes the kiva fills with smoke, and short, earth-colored men line the stone benches along the walls. They have eyes the black color of a bird's, of understanding. Boys will be made men tonight. They will come up out of the earth, rise up from their mother, knowing that man has always come from earth and woman. They come out, and their eyes burn with smoke, and in this circle, beginning now on this night, they cannot be afraid again.

There is existence, always, in everything, existence.

There is marriage and birth. There is living.

I make my way down the steps from the doorway. There is dying and more living.

I shuffle down to the circle of the kiva, bent over with raspy breath, and I am the humpbacked man, the man with spells and magic. The man with music. I hear him, and I am Kokopelli.

I have no strength to dance, but in the moonlight my shadow shivers and stretches large across the kiva floor, and I can spread my arms and almost fold the walls in my embrace. There is the sound of gourd rattles and dry leaves, and I wait on the boom of drums and the shush of feathers. For an animal spirit rising across the floor, the waving of good corn. For the singing of the old songs one must know to gain safe passage. Songs that always make a circle to end where they've begun, begin where they have ended, like the kiva is a circle, and the moon.

The days and seasons.

The dream hoop Hickey wants to hang over her bed that only lets the good dreams through.

The earth and its red heart. A circle enclosing a dot, one of the old signs. A drum. The little round hole in the middle of the floor that leads to the center of the world.

The dance now in the kiva, around the fire, around the self.

And if I live, and come together with Hickey to make sons and daughters, and if I die and am buried in the earth, each is an end to something and the start of something else. Each brings its own good news.

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The Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction

David Walton, *Evening Out*
Leigh Allison Wilson, *From the Bottom Up*
Sandra Thompson, *Close-Ups*
Susan Neville, *The Invention of Flight*
Mary Hood, *How Far She Went*
François Camoin, *Why Men Are Afraid of Women*
Molly Giles, *Rough Translations*
Daniel Curley, *Living with Snakes*
Peter Meinke, *The Piano Tuner*
Tony Ardizzone, *The Evening News*
Salvatore La Puma, *The Boys of Bensonhurst*
Melissa Pritchard, *Spirit Seizures*
Philip F. Deaver, *Silent Retreats*
Gail Galloway Adams, *The Purchase of Order*
Carole L. Glickfeld, *Useful Gifts*
Antonya Nelson, *The Expendables*
Nancy Zafris, *The People I Know*
Debra Monroe, *The Source of Trouble*
Robert H. Abel, *Ghost Traps*
T. M. McNally, *Low Flying Aircraft*
Alfred DePew, *The Melancholy of Departure*
Dennis Hathaway, *The Consequences of Desire*
Rita Ciresi, *Mother Rocket*
Dianne Nelson, *A Brief History of Male Nudes in America*
Christopher McIlroy, *All My Relations*
Alyce Miller, *The Nature of Longing*
Carol Lee Lorenzo, *Nervous Dancer*
C. M. Mayo, *Sky over El Nido*
Wendy Brenner, *Large Animals in Everyday Life*
Paul Rawlins, *No Lie Like Love*
Harvey Grossinger, *The Quarry*

Ha Jin, *Under the Red Flag*
Andy Plattner, *Winter Money*
Frank Soos, *Unified Field Theory*
Mary Clyde, *Survival Rates*
Hester Kaplan, *The Edge of Marriage*
Darrell Spencer, *CAUTION Men in Trees*
Robert Anderson, *Ice Age*
Bill Roorbach, *Big Bend*
Dana Johnson, *Break Any Woman Down*
Gina Ochsner, *The Necessary Grace to Fall*
Kellie Wells, *Compression Scars*
Eric Shade, *Eyesores*
Catherine Brady, *Curled in the Bed of Love*
Ed Allen, *Ate It Anyway*
Gary Fincke, *Sorry I Worried You*
Barbara Sutton, *The Send-Away Girl*
David Crouse, *Copy Cats*
Randy F. Nelson, *The Imaginary Lives of Mechanical Men*
Greg Downs, *Spit Baths*
Peter LaSalle, *Tell Borges If You See Him: Tales of Contemporary Somnambulism*
Anne Panning, *Super America*
Margot Singer, *The Pale of Settlement*
Andrew Porter, *The Theory of Light and Matter*
Peter Selgin, *Drowning Lessons*
Geoffrey Becker, *Black Elvis*
Lori Ostlund, *The Bigness of the World*
Linda LeGarde Grover, *The Dance Boots*
Jessica Treadway, *Please Come Back To Me*
Amina Gautier, *At-Risk*
Melinda Moustakis, *Bear Down, Bear North*
E. J. Levy, *Love, in Theory*
Hugh Sheehy, *The Invisibles*